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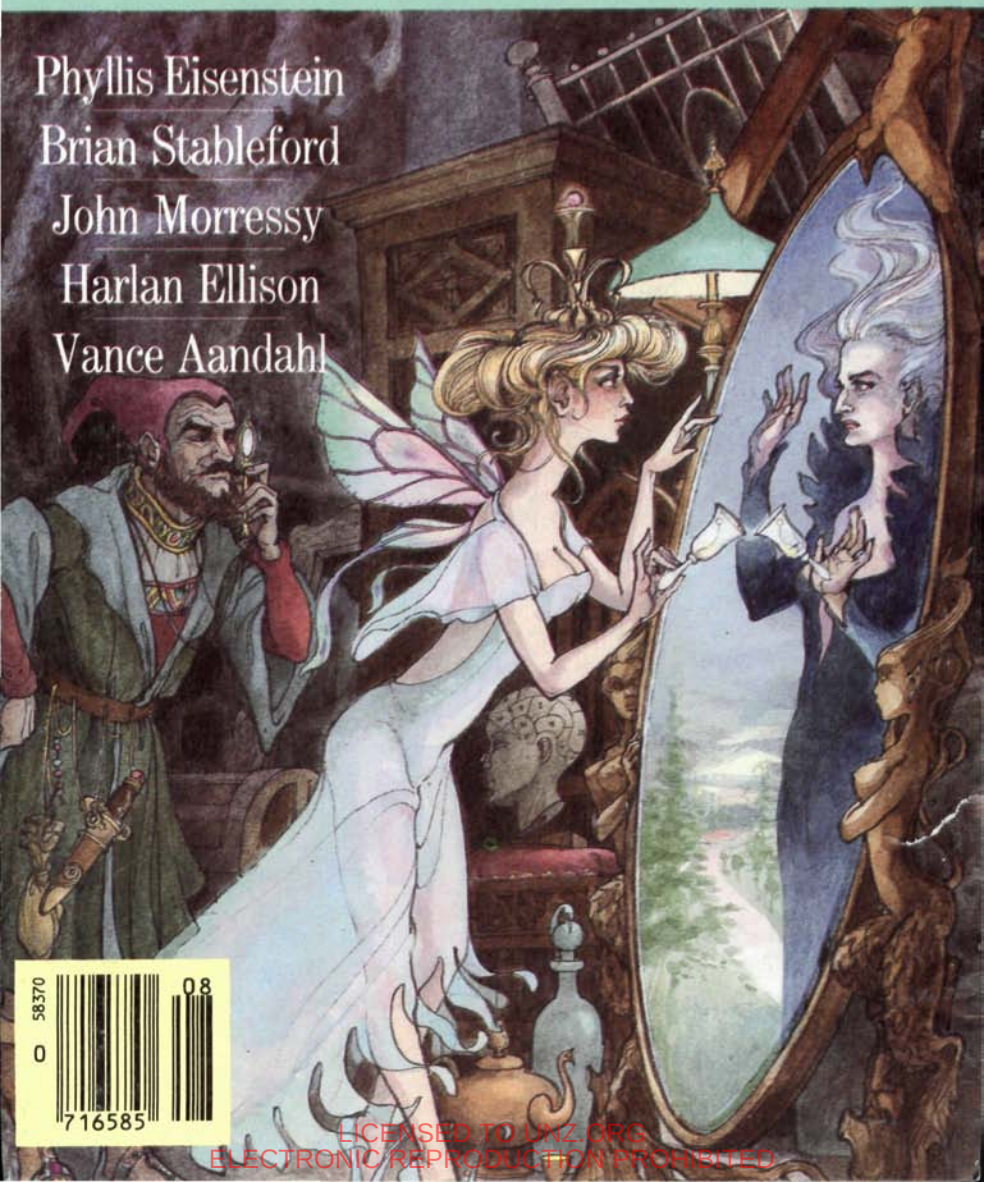
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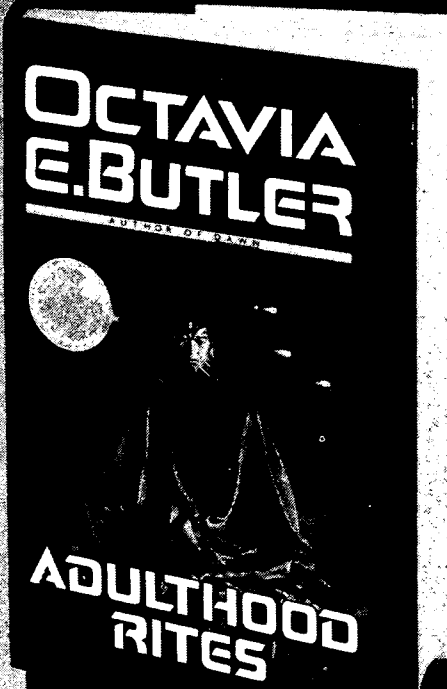
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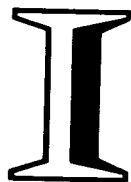
The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 75, No. 2, Whole No. 447, Aug. 1988. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at \$1.75 per copy. Annual subscription \$19.50; \$23.50 outside of the U.S. [Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.] Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1988 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

Although this is Brian Stableford's first F&SF story, his name is a familiar one to most SF readers. Mr. Stableford is an English writer, critic and academic (he teaches sociology at the University of Reading) and was an editor of the Nicholls SCIENCE FICTION ENCYCLOPEDIA. He has written about thirty books: Most recently THE THIRD MILLENNIUM, a speculative history of the next thousand years, and THE EMPIRE OF FEAR, a novel.

THE MAN WHO LOVED THE VAMPIRE LADY

By Brian Stableford

*A man who loves a vampire lady may not die young,
but cannot live forever. (Walachian proverb)*



IT WAS THE THIRTEENTH OF June in the Year of Our Lord 1623. Grand Normandy was in the grip of an early spell of warm weather, and the streets of London bathed in sunlight. There were crowds everywhere, and the port was busy with ships, three having docked that very day. One of the ships, the *Freemartin*, was from the Moorish enclave and had produce from the heart of Africa, including ivory and the skins of exotic animals. There were rumors, too, of secret and more precious goods: jewels and magical charms; but such rumors always attended the docking of any vessel from remote parts of the world. Beggars and street urchins had flocked to the dockland, responsive as ever to such whisperings, and were plaguing every sailor in the streets, as anxious for gossip as for copper coins. It seemed

that the only faces not animated by excitement were those worn by the severed heads that dressed the spikes atop the Southwark Gate. The Tower of London, though, stood quite aloof from the hubbub, its tall and forbidding turrets so remote from the streets that they belonged to a different world.

Edmund Cordery, mechanician to the court of the Archduke Girard, tilted the small concave mirror on the brass device that rested on his workbench, catching the rays of the afternoon sun and deflecting the light through the system of lenses.

He turned away and directed his son, Noell, to take his place. "Tell me if all is well," he said tiredly. "I can hardly focus my eyes, let alone the instrument."

Noell closed his left eye and put his other to the microscope. He turned the wheel that adjusted the height of the stage. "It's perfect," he said. "What is it?"

"The wing of a moth." Edmund scanned the polished tabletop, checking that the other slides were in readiness for the demonstration. The prospect of Lady Carmilla's visit filled him with a complex anxiety that he resented in himself. Even in the old days, she had not come to his laboratory often. but to see her here — on his own territory, as it were — would be bound to awaken memories that were untouched by the glimpses that he caught of her in the public parts of the Tower and on ceremonial occasions.

"The water slide isn't ready," Noell pointed out.

Edmund shook his head. "I'll make a fresh one when the time comes," he said. "Living things are fragile, and the world that is in a water drop is all too easily destroyed."

He looked farther along the bench-top, and moved a crucible, placing it out of sight behind a row of jars. It was impossible — and unnecessary — to make the place tidy, but he felt it important to conserve some sense of order and control. To discourage himself from fidgeting, he went to the window and looked out at the sparkling Thames and the strange gray sheen on the slate roofs of the houses beyond. From this high vantage point, the people were tiny; he was higher even than the cross on the steeple of the church beside the Leathermarket. Edmund was not a devout man, but such was the agitation within him, yearning for expression in action, that the sight of the cross on the church made him cross himself, murmuring the ritual devotion. As soon as he had done it, he cursed himself for childishness.

I am forty-four years old, he thought, and a mechanician. I am no longer the boy who was favored with the love of the lady, and there is no need for this stupid trepidation.

He was being deliberately unfair to himself in this private scolding. It was not simply the fact that he had once been Carmilla's lover that made him anxious. There was the microscope, and the ship from the Moorish country. He hoped that he would be able to judge by the lady's reaction how much cause there really was for fear.

The door opened then, and the lady entered. She half turned to indicate by a flutter of her hand that her attendant need not come in with her, and he withdrew, closing the door behind him. She was alone, with no friend or favorite in tow. She came across the room carefully, lifting the hem of her skirt a little, though the floor was not dusty. Her gaze flicked from side to side, to take note of the shelves, the beakers, the furnace, and the numerous tools of the mechanician's craft. To a commoner, it would have seemed a threatening environment, redolent with unholiness, but her attitude was cool and controlled. She arrived to stand before the brass instrument that Edmund had recently completed, but did not look long at it before raising her eyes to look fully into Edmund's face.

"You look well, Master Cordery," she said calmly. "But you are pale. You should not shut yourself in your rooms now that summer is come to Normandy."

Edmund bowed slightly, but met her gaze. She had not changed in the slightest degree, of course, since the days when he had been intimate with her. She was six hundred years old — hardly younger than the archduke — and the years were impotent as far as her appearance was concerned. Her complexion was much darker than his, her eyes a deep liquid brown, and her hair jet black. He had not stood so close to her for several years, and he could not help the tide of memories rising in his mind. For her, it would be different: his hair was gray now, his skin creased; he must seem an altogether different person. As he met her gaze, though, it seemed to him that she, too, was remembering, and not without fondness.

"My lady," he said, his voice quite steady, "may I present my son and apprentice, Noell."

Noell bowed more deeply than his father, blushing with embarrassment.

The Lady Carmilla favored the youth with a smile. "He has the look

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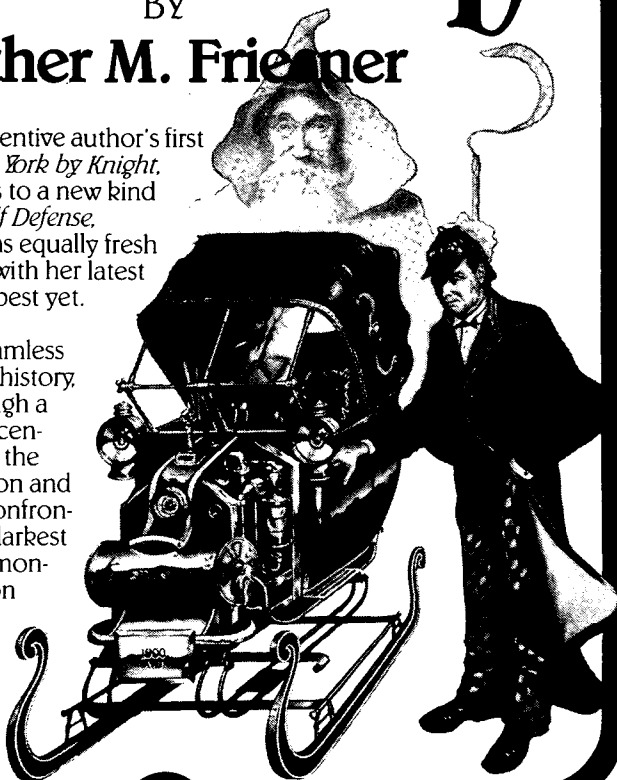
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of you, Master Cordery," she said — a casual compliment. She returned her attention then to the instrument.

"The designer was correct?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed," he replied. "The device is most ingenious. I would dearly like to meet the man who thought of it. A fine discovery — though it taxed the talents of my lens grinder severely. I think we might make a better one, with much care and skill; this is but a poor example, as one must expect from a first attempt."

The Lady Carmilla seated herself at the bench, and Edmund showed her how to apply her eye to the instrument, and how to adjust the focusing wheel and the mirror. She expressed surprise at the appearance of the magnified moth's wing, and Edmund took her through the series of prepared slides, which included other parts of insects' bodies, and sections through the stems and seeds of plants.

"I need a sharper knife and a steadier hand, my lady," he told her. "The device exposes the clumsiness of my cutting."

"Oh no, Master Cordery," she assured him politely. "These are quite pretty enough. But we were told that more interesting things might be seen. Living things too small for ordinary sight."

Edmund bowed in apology and explained about the preparation of water slides. He made a new one, using a pipette to take a drop from a jar full of dirty river water. Patiently, he helped the lady search the slide for the tiny creatures that human eyes were not equipped to perceive. He showed her one that flowed as if it were semiliquid itself, and tinier ones that moved by means of cilia. She was quite captivated, and watched for some time, moving the slide very gently with her painted fingernails.

Eventually she asked: "Have you looked at other fluids?"

"What kind of fluids?" he asked, though the question was quite clear to him and disturbed him.

She was not prepared to mince words with him. "Blood, Master Cordery," she said very softly. Her past acquaintance with him had taught her respect for his intelligence, and he half regretted it.

"Blood clots very quickly," he told her. "I could not produce a satisfactory slide. It would take unusual skill."

"I'm sure that it would," she replied.

"Noell has made drawings of many of the things we *have* looked at," said Edmund. "Would you like to see them?"

She accepted the change of subject, and indicated that she would. She moved to Noell's station and began sorting through the drawings, occasionally looking up at the boy to compliment him on his work. Edmund stood by, remembering how sensitive he once had been to her moods and desires, trying hard to work out now exactly what she was thinking. Something in one of her contemplative glances at Noell sent an icy pang of dread into Edmund's gut, and he found his more important fears momentarily displaced by what might have been anxiety for his son, or simply jealousy. He cursed himself again for his weakness.

"May I take these to show the archduke?" asked the Lady Carmilla, addressing the question to Noell rather than to his father. The boy nodded, still too embarrassed to construct a proper reply. She took a selection of the drawings and rolled them into a scroll. She stood and faced Edmund again.

"We are most interested in this apparatus," she informed him. "We must consider carefully whether to provide you with new assistants, to encourage development of the appropriate skills. In the meantime, you may return to your ordinary work. I will send someone for the instrument, so that the archduke can inspect it at his leisure. Your son draws very well, and must be encouraged. You and he may visit me in my chambers on Monday next; we will dine at seven o'clock, and you may tell me about all your recent work."

Edmund bowed to signal his acquiescence — it was, of course, a command rather than an invitation. He moved before her to the door in order to hold it open for her. The two exchanged another brief glance as she went past him.

When she had gone, it was as though something taut unwound inside him, leaving him relaxed and emptied. He felt strangely cool and distant as he considered the possibility — stronger now — that his life was in peril.

When the twilight had faded, Edmund lit a single candle on the bench and sat staring into the flame while he drank dark wine from a flask. He did not look up when Noell came into the room, but when the boy brought another stool close to his and sat down upon it, he offered the flask. Noell took it, but sipped rather gingerly.

"I'm old enough to drink now?" he commented dryly.

"You're old enough," Edmund assured him. "But beware of excess, and never drink alone. Conventional fatherly advice, I believe."

Noell reached across the bench so that he could stroke the barrel of the microscope with slender fingers.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

Edmund sighed. "You're old enough for that, too, I suppose?"

"I think you ought to tell me."

Edmund looked at the brass instrument and said: "It were better to keep things like this dark secret. Some human mechanician, I daresay, eager to please the vampire lords and ladies, showed off his cleverness as proud as a peacock. Thoughtless. Inevitable, though, now that all this play with lenses has become fashionable."

"You'll be glad of eyeglasses when your sight begins to fail," Noell told him. "In any case, I can't see the danger in this new toy."

Edmund smiled. "New toys," he mused. "Clocks to tell the time, mills to grind the corn, lenses to aid human sight. Produced by human craftsmen for the delight of their masters. I think we've finally succeeded in proving to the vampires just how very clever we are — and how much more there is to know than we know already."

"You think the vampires are beginning to fear us?"

Edmund gulped wine from the flask and passed it again to his son. "Their rule is founded in fear and superstition," he said quietly. "They're long-lived, suffer only mild attacks of diseases that are fatal to us, and have marvelous powers of regeneration. But they're not immortal, and they're vastly outnumbered by humans. Terror keeps them safe, but terror is based in ignorance, and behind their haughtiness and arrogance, there's a gnawing fear of what might happen if humans ever lost their supernatural reverence for vampirekind. It's very difficult for them to die, but they don't fear death any the less for that."

"There've been rebellions against vampire rule. They've always failed."

Edmund nodded to concede the point. "There are 3 million people in Grand Normandy," he said, "and less than five thousand vampires. There are only forty thousand vampires in the entire imperium of Gaul, and about the same number in the imperium of Byzantium — no telling how many there may be in the khanate of Walachia and Cathay, but not so very many more. In Africa the vampires must be outnumbered three or four thousand to one. If people no longer saw them as demons and demi-

gods, as unconquerable forces of evil, their empire would be fragile. The centuries through which they live give them wisdom, but longevity seems to be inimical to creative thought — they learn, but they don't *invent*. Humans remain the true masters of art and science, which are forces of change. They've tried to control that — to turn it to their advantage — but it remains a thorn in their side."

"But they do have power," insisted Noell. "They *are* vampires."

Edmund shrugged. "Their longevity is real — their powers of regeneration, too. But is it really their magic that makes them so? I don't know for sure what merit there is in their incantations and rituals, and I don't think even *they* know — they cling to their rites because they dare not abandon them, but where the power that makes humans into vampires really comes from, no one knows. From the devil? I think not. I don't believe in the devil — I think it's something in the blood. I think vampirism may be a kind of disease — but a disease that makes men stronger instead of weaker, insulates them against death instead of killing them. If that *is* the case — do you see now why the Lady Carmilla asked whether I had looked at blood beneath the microscope?"

Noell stared at the instrument for twenty seconds or so, mulling over the idea. Then he laughed.

"If we could *all* become vampires," he said lightly, "we'd have to suck one another's blood."

Edmund couldn't bring himself to look for such ironies. For him, the possibilities inherent in discovering the secrets of vampire nature were much more immediate, and utterly bleak.

"It's not true that they *need* to suck the blood of humans," he told the boy. "It's not nourishment. It gives them . . . a kind of pleasure that we can't understand. And it's part of the mystique that makes them so terrible . . . and hence so powerful." He stopped, feeling embarrassed. He did not know how much Noell knew about his sources of information. He and his wife never talked about the days of his affair with the Lady Carmilla, but there was no way to keep gossip and rumor from reaching the boy's ears.

Noell took the flask again, and this time took a deeper draft from it. "I've heard," he said distantly, "that humans find pleasure, too . . . in their blood being drunk."

"No," replied Edmund calmly. "That's untrue. Unless one counts the

small pleasure of sacrifice. The pleasure that a human man takes from a vampire lady is the same pleasure that he takes from a human lover. It might be different for the girls who entertain vampire men, but I suspect it's just the excitement of hoping that they may become vampires themselves."

Noell hesitated, and would probably have dropped the subject, but Edmund realized suddenly that he did not want the subject dropped. The boy had a right to know, and perhaps might one day *need* to know.

"That's not entirely true," Edmund corrected himself. "When the Lady Carmilla used to taste my blood, it did give me pleasure, in a way. It pleased me because it pleased *her*. There is an excitement in loving a vampire lady, which makes it different from loving an ordinary woman . . . even though the chance that a vampire lady's lover may himself become a vampire is so remote as to be inconsiderable."

Noell blushed, not knowing how to react to this acceptance into his father's confidence. Finally he decided that it was best to pretend a purely academic interest.

"Why are there so many more vampire women than men?" he asked.

"No one knows for sure," Edmund said. "No humans, at any rate. I can tell you what I believe, from hearsay and from reasoning, but you must understand that it is a dangerous thing to think about, let alone to speak about."

Noell nodded.

"The vampires keep their history secret," said Edmund, "and they try to control the writing of human history, but the following facts are probably true. Vampirism came to western Europe in the fifth century, with the vampire-led horde of Attila. Attila must have known well enough how to make more vampires — he converted both Aëtius, who became ruler of the imperium of Gaul, and Theodosius II, the emperor of the east who was later murdered. Of all the vampires that now exist, the vast majority must be converts. I have heard reports of vampire children born to vampire ladies, but it must be an extremely rare occurrence. Vampire men seem to be much less virile than human men — it is said that they couple very rarely. Nevertheless, they frequently take human consorts, and these consorts often become vampires. Vampires usually claim that this is a gift, bestowed deliberately by magic, but I am not so sure they can control the process. I think the semen of vampire men carries some kind of seed

that communicates vampirism much as the semen of humans makes women pregnant — and just as haphazardly. That's why the male lovers of vampire ladies don't become vampires."

Noell considered this, and then asked: "Then where do vampire lords come from?"

"They're converted by other male vampires," Edmund said. "Just as Attila converted Aëtius and Theodosius." He did not elaborate, but waited to see whether Noell understood the implication. An expression of disgust crossed the boy's face and Edmund did not know whether to be glad or sorry that his son could follow the argument through.

"Because it doesn't always happen," Edmund went on, "it's easy for the vampires to pretend that they have some special magic. But some women never become pregnant, though they lie with their husbands for years. It is said, though, that a human may also become a vampire by drinking vampire's blood — if he knows the appropriate magic spell. That's a rumor the vampires don't like, and they exact terrible penalties if anyone is caught trying the experiment. The ladies of our own court, of course, are for the most part onetime lovers of the archduke or his cousins. It would be indelicate to speculate about the conversion of the archduke, though he is certainly acquainted with Aëtius."

Noell reached out a hand, palm downward, and made a few passes above the candle flame, making it flicker from side to side. He stared at the microscope.

"Have you looked at blood?" he asked.

"I have," replied Edmund. "And semen. Human blood, of course — and human semen."

"And?"

Edmund shook his head. "They're certainly not homogeneous fluids," he said, "but the instrument isn't good enough for really detailed inspection. There are small corpuscles — the ones in semen have long, writhing tails — but there's more . . . much more . . . to be seen, if I had the chance. By tomorrow this instrument will be gone — I don't think I'll be given the chance to build another."

"You're surely not in danger! You're an important man — and your loyalty has never been in question. People think of you as being almost a vampire yourself. A black magician. The kitchen girls are afraid of me because I'm your son — they cross themselves when they see me."

Edmund laughed, a little bitterly. "I've no doubt they suspect me of intercourse with demons, and avoid my gaze for fear of the spell of the evil eye. But none of that matters to the vampires. To them, I'm only a human, and for all that they value my skills, they'd kill me without a thought if they suspected that I might have dangerous knowledge."

Noell was clearly alarmed by this. "Wouldn't. . . ." He stopped, but saw Edmund waiting for him to ask, and carried on after only a brief pause. "The Lady Carmilla. . . wouldn't she. . . ?"

"Protect me?" Edmund shook his head. "Not even if I were her favorite still. Vampire loyalty is to vampires."

"She was human once."

"It counts for nothing. She's been a vampire for nearly six hundred years, but it wouldn't be any different if she were no older than I."

"But . . . she did love you?"

"In her way," said Edmund sadly. "In her way." He stood up then, no longer feeling the urgent desire to help his son to understand. There were things the boy could find out only for himself and might never have to. He took up the candle tray and shielded the flame with his hand as he walked to the door. Noell followed him, leaving the empty flask behind.

Edmund left the citadel by the so-called Traitor's Gate, and crossed the Thames by the Tower Bridge. The houses on the bridge were in darkness now, but there was still a trickle of traffic; even at two in the morning, the business of the great city did not come to a standstill. The night had clouded over, and a light drizzle had begun to fall. Some of the oil lamps that were supposed to keep the thoroughfare lit at all times had gone out, and there was not a lamplighter in sight. Edmund did not mind the shadows, though.

He was aware before he reached the south bank that two men were dogging his footsteps, and he dawdled in order to give them the impression that he would be easy to track. Once he entered the network of streets surrounding the Leathermarket, though, he gave them the slip. He knew the maze of filthy streets well enough — he had lived here as a child. It was while he was apprenticed to a local clockmaker that he had learned the cleverness with tools that had eventually brought him to the notice of his predecessor, and had sent him on the road to fortune and celebrity. He had a brother and a sister still living and working in the district, though

he saw them very rarely. Neither one of them was proud to have a reputed magician for a brother, and they had not forgiven him his association with the Lady Carmilla.

He picked his way carefully through the garbage in the dark alleys, unperturbed by the sound of scavenging rats. He kept his hands on the pommel of the dagger that was clasped to his belt, but he had no need to draw it. Because the stars were hidden, the night was pitch-dark, and few of the windows were lit from within by candlelight, but he was able to keep track of his progress by reaching out to touch familiar walls every now and again.

He came eventually to a tiny door set three steps down from a side street, and rapped upon it quickly, three times and then twice. There was a long pause before he felt the door yield beneath his fingers, and he stepped inside hurriedly. Until he relaxed when the door clicked shut again, he did not realize how tense he had been.

He waited for a candle to be lit.

The light, when it came, illuminated a thin face, crabbed and wrinkled, the eyes very pale and the wispy white hair gathered imperfectly behind a linen bonnet.

"The lord be with you," he whispered.

"And with you, Edmund Cordery," she croaked.

He frowned at the use of his name — it was a deliberate breach of etiquette, a feeble and meaningless gesture of independence. She did not like him, though he had never been less than kind to her. She did not fear him as so many others did, but she considered him tainted. They had been bound together in the business of the Fraternity for nearly twenty years, but she would never completely trust him.

She lead him into an inner room, and left him there to take care of his business.

A stranger stepped from the shadows. He was short, stout, and bald, perhaps sixty years old. He made the special sign of the cross, and Edmund responded.

"I'm Cordery," he said.

"Were you followed?" The older man's tone was deferential and fearful.

"Not here. They followed me from the Tower, but it was easy to shake them loose."

"That's bad."

It would be a pity to wipe out half of Europe in the cause of attacking our oppressors.

"Perhaps — but it has to do with another matter, not with our business. There's no danger to you. Do you have what I asked for?"

The stout man nodded uncertainly. "My masters are unhappy," he said. "I have been asked to tell you that they do not want you to take risks. You are too valuable to place yourself in peril."

"I am in peril already. Events are overtaking us. In any case, it is neither your concern nor that of your . . . masters. It is for me to decide."

The stout man shook his head, but it was a gesture of resignation rather than a denial. He pulled something from beneath the chair where he had waited in the shadows. It was a large box, clad in leather. A row of small holes was set in the longer side, and there was a sound of scratching from within that testified to the presence of living creatures.

"You did exactly as I instructed?" asked Edmund.

The small man nodded, then put his hand on the mechanician's arm, fearfully. "Don't open it, sir, I beg you. Not here."

"There's nothing to fear," Edmund assured him.

"You haven't been in Africa, sir, as I have. Believe me, *everyone* is afraid — and not merely humans. They say that vampires are dying, too."

"Yes, I know," said Edmund distractedly. He shook off the older man's restraining hand and undid the straps that sealed the box. He lifted the lid, but not far — just enough to let the light in, and to let him see what was inside.

The box contained two big gray rats. They cowered from the light.

Edmund shut the lid again and fastened the straps.

"It's not my place, sir," said the little man hesitantly, "but I'm not sure that you really understand what you have there. I've seen the cities of West Africa — I've been in Corunna, too, and Marseilles. They remember other plagues in those cities, and all the horror stories are emerging again to haunt them. Sir, if any such thing ever came to London. . . ."

Edmund tested the weight of the box to see whether he could carry it comfortably. "It's not your concern," he said. "Forget everything that has happened. I will communicate with your masters. It is in my hands now."

"Forgive me," said the other, "but I must say this: there is naught to be gained from destroying vampires, if we destroy ourselves, too. It would be

a pity to wipe out half of Europe in the cause of attacking our oppressors."

Edmund stared at the stout man coldly. "You talk too much," he said. "Indeed, you talk a *deal* too much."

"I beg your pardon, sire."

Edmund hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to reassure the messenger that his anxiety was understandable, but he had learned long ago that where the business of the Fraternity was concerned, it was best to say as little as possible. There was no way of knowing when this man would speak again of this affair, or to whom, or with what consequence.

The mechanician took up the box, making sure that he could carry it comfortably. The rats stirred inside, scrabbling with their small clawed feet. With his free hand, Edmund made the sign of the cross again.

"God go with you," said the messenger, with urgent sincerity.

"And with thy spirit," replied Edmund colorlessly.

Then he left, without pausing to exchange a ritual farewell with the crone. He had no difficulty in smuggling his burden back into the Tower, by means of a gate where the guard was long practiced in the art of turning a blind eye.

When Monday came, Edmund and Noell made their way to the Lady Carmilla's chambers. Noell had never been in such an apartment before, and it was a source of wonder to him. Edmund watched the boy's reactions to the carpets, the wall hangings, the mirrors and ornaments, and could not help but recall the first time *he* had entered these chambers. Nothing had changed here, and the rooms were full of provocations to stir and sharpen his faded memories.

Younger vampires tended to change their surroundings often, addicted to novelty, as if they feared the prospect of being changeless themselves. The Lady Carmilla had long since passed beyond this phase of her career. She had grown used to changelessness, had transcended the kind of attitude to the world that permitted boredom and ennui. She had adapted herself to a new aesthetic of existence, whereby her personal space became an extension of her own eternal sameness, and innovation was confined to tightly controlled areas of her life — including the irregular shifting of her erotic affections from one lover to another.

The sumptuousness of the lady's table was a further source of astonishment to Noell. Silver plates and forks he had imagined, and crystal goblets,

and carved decanters of wine. But the lavishness of provision for just three diners — the casual waste — was something that obviously set him aback. He had always known that he was himself a member of a privileged elite, and that by the standards of the greater world, Master Cordery and his family ate well; the revelation that there was a further order of magnitude to distinguish the private world of the real aristocracy clearly made its impact upon him.

Edmund had been very careful in preparing his dress, fetching from his closet finery that he had not put on for many years. On official occasions he was always concerned to play the part of mechanician, and dressed in order to sustain that appearance. He never appeared as a courtier, always as a functionary. Now, though, he was reverting to a kind of performance that Noell had never seen him play, and though the boy had no idea of the subtleties of his father's performance, he clearly understood something of what was going on; he had complained acidly about the dull and plain way in which his father had made *him* dress.

Edmund ate and drank sparingly, and was pleased to note that Noell did likewise, obeying his father's instructions despite the obvious temptations of the lavish provision. For a while the lady was content to exchange routine courtesies, but she came quickly enough — by her standards — to the real business of the evening.

"My cousin Girard," she told Edmund, "Is quite enraptured by your clever device. He finds it most interesting."

"Then I am pleased to make him a gift of it," Edmund replied. "And I would be pleased to make another, as a gift for Your Ladyship."

"That is not our desire," she said coolly. "In fact, we have other matters in mind. The archduke and his seneschal have discussed certain tasks that you might profitably carry out. Instructions will be communicated to you in due time, I have no doubt."

"Thank you, my lady," said Edmund.

"The ladies of the court were pleased with the drawings that I showed to them," said the Lady Carmilla, turning to look at Noell. "They marveled at the thought that a cupful of Thames water might contain thousands of tiny living creatures. Do you think that our bodies, too, might be the habitation of countless invisible insects?"

Noell opened his mouth to reply, because the question was addressed to him, but Edmund interrupted smoothly.

"There are creatures that may live upon our bodies," he said, "and worms that may live within. We are told that the macrocosm reproduces in essence the microcosm of human beings; perhaps there is a small microcosm within us, where our natures are reproduced again, incalculably small. I have read. . . ."

"I have read, Master Cordery," she cut in, "that the illnesses that afflict humankind might be carried from person to person by means of these tiny creatures."

"The idea that diseases were communicated from one person to another by tiny seeds was produced in antiquity," Edmund replied, "but I do not know how such seeds might be recognized, and I think it very unlikely that the creatures we have seen in river water could possibly be of that character."

"It is a disquieting thought," she insisted, "that our bodies might be inhabited by creatures of which we can know nothing, and that every breath we take might be carrying into us seeds of all kinds of change, too small to be seen or tasted. It makes me feel uneasy."

"But there is no need," Edmund protested. "Seeds of corruptibility take root in human flesh, but yours is inviolate."

"You know that is not so, Master Cordery," she said levelly. "You have seen me ill yourself."

"That was a pox that killed many humans, my lady — yet it gave to you no more than a mild fever."

"We have reports from the imperium of Byzantium, and from the Moorish enclave, too, that there is plague in Africa, and that it has now reached the southern regions of the imperium of Gaul. It is said that this plague makes little distinction between human and vampire."

"Rumors, my lady," said Edmund soothingly. "You know how news becomes blacker as it travels."

The Lady Carmilla turned again to Noell, and this time addressed him by name so that there could be no opportunity for Edmund to usurp the privilege of answering her. "Are you afraid of me, Noell?" she asked.

The boy was startled, and stumbled slightly over his reply, which was in the negative.

"You must not lie to me," she told him. "You *are* afraid of me, because I am a vampire. Master Cordery is a skeptic, and must have told you that vampires have less magic than is commonly credited to us, but he must

also have told you that I can do you harm if I will. Would you like to be a vampire yourself, Noell?"

Noell was still confused by the correction, and hesitated over his reply, but he eventually said: "Yes, I would."

"Of course you would," she purred. "All humans would be vampires if they could, no matter how they might pretend when they bend the knee in church. And men *can* become vampires; immortality is within our gift. Because of this, we have always enjoyed the loyalty and devotion of the greater number of our human subjects. We have always rewarded that devotion in some measure. Few have joined our ranks, but the many have enjoyed centuries of order and stability. The vampires rescued Europe from a Dark Age, and as long as vampires rule, barbarism will always be held in check. Our rule has not always been kind, because we cannot tolerate defiance, but the alternative would have been far worse. Even so, there are men who would destroy us — did you know that?"

Noell did not know how to reply to this, so he simply stared, waiting for her to continue. She seemed a little impatient with his gracelessness, and Edmund deliberately let the awkward pause go on. He saw a certain advantage in allowing Noell to make a poor impression.

"There is an organization of rebels," the Lady Carmilla went on. "A secret society, ambitious to discover the secret way by which vampires are made. They put about the idea that they would make all men immortal, but this is a lie, and foolish. The members of this brotherhood seek power for themselves."

The vampire lady paused to direct the clearing of one set of dishes and the bringing of another. She asked for a new wine, too. Her gaze wandered back and forth between the gauche youth and his self-assured father.

"The loyalty of your family is, of course, beyond question," she eventually continued. "No one understands the workings of society like a mechanician, who knows well enough how forces must be balanced and how the different parts of a machine must interlock and support one another. Master Cordery knows well how the cleverness of rulers resembles the cleverness of clockmakers, do you not?"

"Indeed, I do, my lady," replied Edmund.

"There might be a way," she said, in a strangely distant tone, "that a good mechanician might earn a conversion to vampirism."

Edmund was wise enough not to interpret this as an offer or a promise.

He accepted a measure of the new wine and said: "My lady, there are matters that it would be as well for us to discuss in private. May I send my son to his room?"

The Lady Carmilla's eyes narrowed just a little, but there was hardly any expression in her finely etched features. Edmund held his breath, knowing that he had forced a decision upon her that she had not intended to make so soon.

"The poor boy has not quite finished his meal," she said.

"I think he has had enough, my lady," Edmund countered. Noell did not disagree, and, after a brief hesitation, the lady bowed to signal her permission. Edmund asked Noell to leave, and, when he was gone, the Lady Carmilla rose from her seat and went from the dining room into an inner chamber. Edmund followed her.

"You were presumptuous, Master Cordery," she told him.

"I was carried away, my lady. There are too many memories here."

"The boy is mine," she said, "if I so choose. You do know that, do you not?"

Edmund bowed.

"I did not ask you here tonight to make you witness the seduction of your son. Nor do you think that I did. This matter that you would discuss with me — does it concern science or treason?"

"Science, my lady. As you have said yourself, my loyalty is not in question."

Carmilla laid herself upon a sofa and indicated that Edmund should take a chair nearby. This was the antechamber to her bedroom, and the air was sweet with the odor of cosmetics.

"Speak," she bade him.

"I believe that the archduke is afraid of what my little device might reveal," he said. "He fears that it will expose to the eye such seeds as carry vampirism from one person to another, just as it might expose the seeds that carry disease. I think that the man who devised the instrument may have been put to death already, but I think you know well enough that a discovery once made is likely to be made again and again. You are uncertain as to what course of action would best serve your ends, because you cannot tell whence the greater threat to your rule might come. There is the Fraternity, which is dedicated to your destruction; there is plague in Africa, from which even vampires may die; and there is the new sight,

which renders visible what previously lurked unseen. Do you want my advice, Lady Carmilla?"

"Do you *have* any advice, Edmund?"

"Yes. Do not try to control by terror and persecution the things that are happening. Let your rule be unkind *now*, as it has been before, and it will open the way to destruction. Should you concede power gently, you might live for centuries yet, but if you strike out . . . your enemies will strike back."

The vampire lady leaned back her head, looking at the ceiling. She contrived a small laugh.

"I cannot take advice such as that to the archduke," she told him flatly.

"I thought not, my lady," Edmund replied very calmly.

"You humans have your own immortality," she complained. "Your faith promises it, and you all affirm it. Your faith tells you that you must not covet the immortality that is ours, and we do no more than agree with you when we guard it so jealously. You should look to your Christ for fortune, not to us. I think you know well enough that we could not convert the world if we wanted to. Our magic is such that it can be used only sparingly. Are you distressed because it has never been offered to you? Are you bitter? Are you becoming our enemy because you cannot become our kin?"

"You have nothing to fear from me, my lady," he lied. Then he added, not quite sure whether it was a lie or not: "I loved you faithfully. I still do."

She sat up straight then, and reached out a hand as though to stroke his cheek, though he was too far away for her to reach.

"That is what I told the archduke," she said, "when he suggested to me that you might be a traitor. I promised him that I could test your loyalty more keenly in my chambers than his officers in theirs. I do not think you could delude me. Edmund. Do you?"

"No, my lady," he replied.

"By morning," she told him gently, "I will know whether or not you are a traitor."

"That you will," he assured her. "That you will, my lady."

He woke before her, his mouth dry and his forehead burning. He was not sweating — indeed, he was possessed by a feeling of desiccation, as though the moisture were being squeezed out of his organs. His head was aching, and the light of the morning sun that streamed through the unshuttered window hurt his eyes.

He pulled himself up to a half-sitting position, pushing the coverlet back from his bare chest.

So soon! he thought. He had not expected to be consumed so quickly, but he was surprised to find that his reaction was one of relief rather than fear or regret. He had difficulty collecting his thoughts, and was perversely glad to accept that he did not need to.

He looked down at the cuts that she had made on his breast with her little silver knife; they were raw and red, and made a strange contrast with the faded scars whose crisscross pattern still engraved the story of un-forgotten passions. He touched the new wounds gently with his fingers, and winced at the fiery pain.

She woke up then, and saw him inspecting the marks.

"Have you missed the knife?" she asked sleepily. "Were you hungry for its touch?"

There was no need to lie now, and there was a delicious sense of freedom in that knowledge. There was a joy in being able to face her, at last, quite naked in his thoughts as well as his flesh.

"Yes, my lady," he said with a slight croak in his voice. "I had missed the knife. Its touch . . . rekindled flames in my soul."

She had closed her eyes again, to allow herself to wake slowly. She laughed. "It is pleasant, sometimes, to return to forsaken pastures. You can have no notion how a particular *taste* may stir memories. I am glad to have seen you again, in this way. I had grown quite used to you as the gray mechanician. But now. . . ."

He laughed, as lightly as she, but the laugh turned to a cough, and something in the sound alerted her to the fact that all was not as it should be. She opened her eyes and raised her head, turning toward him.

"Why, Edmund," she said, "you're as pale as death!"

She reached out to touch his cheek, and snatched her hand away again as she found it unexpectedly hot and dry. A blush of confusion spread across her own features. He took her hand and held it, looking steadily into her eyes.

"Edmund," she said softly. "What have you done?"

"I can't be sure," he said, "and I will not live to find out, but I have tried to kill you, my lady."

He was pleased by the way her mouth gaped in astonishment. He watched disbelief and anxiety mingle in her expression, as though fight-

ing for control. She did not call out for help.

"This is nonsense," she whispered.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Perhaps it was also nonsense that we talked last evening. Nonsense about treason. Why did you ask me to make the microscope, my lady, when you knew that making me a party to such a secret was as good as signing my death warrant?"

"Oh Edmund," she said with a sigh. "You could not think that it was my own idea? I tried to protect you, Edmund, from Girard's fears and suspicions. It was because I was your protector that I was made to bear the message. What have you done, Edmund?"

He began to reply, but the words turned into a fit of coughing.

She sat upright, wrenching her hand away from his enfeebled grip, and looked down at him as he sank back upon the pillow.

"For the love of God!" she exclaimed, as fearfully as any true believer. "It is the plague — the plague out of Africa!"

He tried to confirm her suspicion, but could do so only with a nod of his head as he fought for breath.

"But they held the *Freemartin* by the Essex coast for a full fortnight's quarantine," she protested. "There was no trace of plague aboard."

"The disease kills men," said Edmund in a shallow whisper. "But animals can carry it, in their blood, without dying."

"You cannot know this!"

Edmund managed a small laugh. "My lady," he said, "I am a member of that Fraternity that interests itself in everything that might kill a vampire. The information came to me in good time for me to arrange delivery of the rats — though when I asked for them, I had not in mind the means of using them that I eventually employed. More recent events. . . ." Again he was forced to stop, unable to draw sufficient breath even to sustain the thin whisper.

The Lady Carmilla put her hand to her throat, swallowing as if she expected to feel evidence already of her infection.

"You would destroy me, Edmund?" she asked, as though she genuinely found it difficult to believe.

"I would destroy you all," he told her. "I would bring disaster, turn the world upside down, to end your rule. . . . We cannot allow you to stamp out learning itself to preserve your empire forever. Order must be fought with chaos, and chaos is come, my lady."

When she tried to rise from the bed, he reached out to restrain her, and though there was no power left in him, she allowed herself to be checked. The coverlet fell away from her, to expose her breasts as she sat upright.

"The boy will die for this, Master Cordery," she said. "His mother, too."

"They're gone," he told her. "Noell went from your table to the custody of the society that I serve. By now they're beyond your reach. The archduke will never catch them."

She stared at him, and now he could see the beginnings of hate and fear in her stare.

"You came here last night to bring me poisoned blood," she said. "In the hope that this new disease might kill even me, you condemned yourself to death. What did you do, Edmund?"

He reached out again to touch her arm, and was pleased to see her flinch and draw away: that he had become dreadful.

"Only vampires live forever," he told her hoarsely. "But anyone may drink blood, if they have the stomach for it. I took full measure from my two sick rats . . . and I pray to God that the seed of this fever is raging in my blood . . . and in my semen, too. You, too, have received full measure, my lady . . . and you are in God's hands now like any common mortal. I cannot know for sure whether you will catch the plague, or whether it will kill you, but I — an unbeliever — am not ashamed to pray. Perhaps you could pray, too, my lady, so that we may know how the Lord favors one unbeliever over another."

She looked down at him, her face gradually losing the expressions that had tugged at her features, becoming masklike in its steadiness.

"You could have taken our side, Edmund. I trusted you, and I could have made the archduke trust you, too. You could have become a vampire. We could have shared the centuries, you and I."

This was dissimulation, and they both knew it. He had been her lover, and had ceased to be, and had grown older for so many years that now she remembered him as much in his son as in himself. The promises were all too obviously hollow now, and she realized that she could not even taunt him with them.

From beside the bed she took up the small silver knife that she had used to let his blood. She held it now as if it were a dagger, not a delicate instrument to be used with care and love.

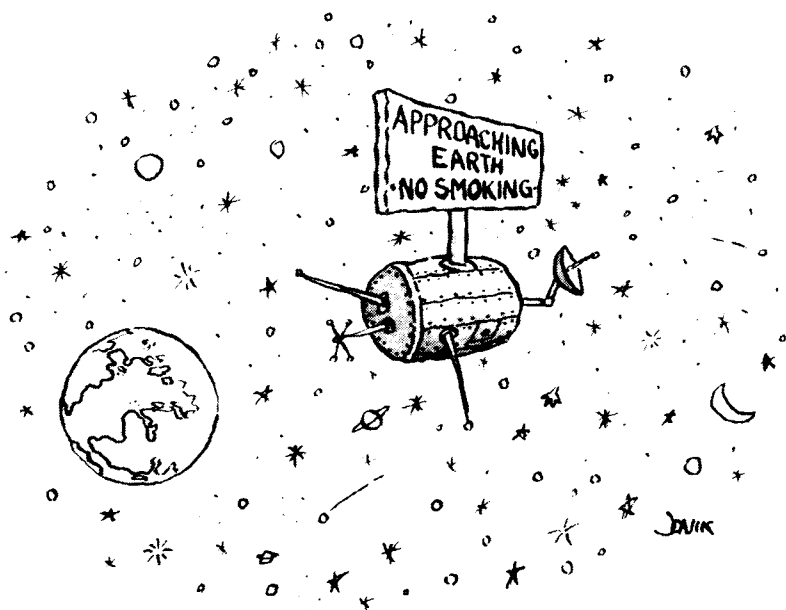
"I thought you still loved me," she told him. "I really did."

That, at least, he thought, might be true.

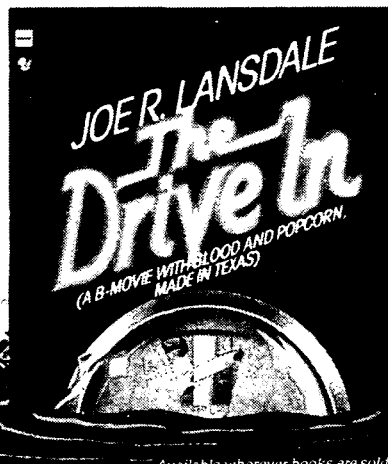
He actually put his head farther back, to expose his throat to the expected thrust. He wanted her to strike him — angrily, brutally, passionately. He had nothing more to say, and would not confirm or deny that he did still love her.

He admitted to himself now that his motives had been mixed, and that he really did not know whether it was loyalty to the Fraternity that had made him submit to this extraordinary experiment. It did not matter.

She cut his throat, and he watched her for a few long seconds while she stared at the blood gouting from the wound. When he saw her put stained fingers to her lips, knowing what she knew, he realized that after her own fashion, she still loved him.



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BOOKS

A L G I S B U D R Y S

The Hormone Jungle, Robert Reed, Donald I Fine, Inc., \$17.95

L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future, Vol. IV, Algis Budrys, Ed. Bridge Publications, Inc., \$4.95

WELL FOLKS, it's Writers of The Future month; Robert Reed was discovered by the W.O.T.F. contest, and I edit the annual anthologies that result from this talent-search. In fact, I'm also the co-ordinating judge, so we know immediately what my prejudices are, correct?

Personally, I find this approach preferable to the one in which one levers a friend into "guest reviewing," in return for complex favors one might not otherwise grant. The other possibility of course is not to review these books, but inasmuch as I most certainly would review them under any other circumstances, I don't care for that idea. So here we are. What follows are (is?) the facts:

And some prejudices, of course.

At any rate, Robert Reed is a fellow built like a runner who lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, and takes a serious view of writing. Many people do, but not all of them can deliver something readers will accept as art, and no two of them agree exactly on what a serious view of writing entails. In Reed's case, it's a liking for staying out in the Midwest, working a nine-to-five job, getting his day's running in rain or shine, and harboring amazing thoughts, the latter to eventually result in communication.

He's one of your self-contained writers. When he won the 1986 L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author of The Writers of The Future Story of The Year,* for his story, "Mudpuppies," he did it under the name of Robert Touzalin, that being the name of a good running street in Lincoln. And he turned up at the annual Awards event to accept his trophy and \$4000 check in a crew-neck sweater. I have to respect this person.

*I wrote that. It's a big trophy.

NEWS FROM

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Narrated Editor of the Year for 1987
by Rod Serling's
The Twilight Zone Magazine



"Every generation likes to think of itself as a generation of movers and shakers, as in: 'The rebels were a time of rebellion, man!' We really revolutionized the way of doing things in the twenties!" Working in the eighties for our changing tomorrow, these are all clichés and poor substitutes for "Storm the Bastille!" and "Give me liberty or give me death." Quotes from the past that are more firmly based on legend than actual fact.

For actual entertainment, we are

drawn toward such concepts as the just revolution. After all, what is Star Wars but the story of a revolution (as in M.S. Murdock's *Vendetta* and *DYNTERYX*)? What was "the New Wave" but a revolution of sorts? And isn't cyberpunk based in part on the communications revolution?

There is a little bit of the rebel in all of us. Like Johnny Zed, we all want the chance to make things better.

When you see me around, be sure to ask me about *Crack*.

Well, "Mudpuppies" (Vol. II) is a striking story, but no one knew if he could write anything else, let alone the novel Donald I. Fine, Inc., promptly gave him a contract for. He did, and it was *The Leeshore*, by Robert Reed, which I reviewed here glowingly last year and which is out now in Questar paperback.

I reviewed it glowingly because it made me glow. Reed had proved he was not only not a one-story author but a potentially quite important one. It's full of science fiction inventiveness, expressed in pleasantly rolling word-rhythms, and it tackles the fundamental speculative-literature questions about why we're here in this universe and what we're supposed to do about it. (The PR for *The Hormone Jungle* cites that review, attributing it to "*The Journal of Fantasy and Science Fiction*." The PR was written by the same editor who had done nothing about Reed's anomalous tendency not to grasp the difference between "lie" and "lay," etc. — which persists to some extent in this second book — but on the other hand, that editor is no longer there.)

As I was saying, in the midst of a powerful grasp of what can be done with English prose, Reed has these peculiar appearances of what may be dyslexia — a trait he shares, by the way, with Samuel R. Delany

and Stephen King. If that's what it is, that's one of the reasons why editors are supposed to be. If it isn't, he'll learn his way out of that. More important to us is that this indubitable front-line talent has cleared the second-novel hurdle. If you ask one of the experts who collect shibboleths about writing, you will learn that the second novel is almost always harder to do — and probably harder for readers to like — than the first.

That's another "truth" you should be wary of. (My undeniably bad novel, for instance, was my third; it grotches me that it was published second and thus reinforces this species of received wisdom.) But what the second novel is truly to be looked-at for is some sign of where the whole career might go. After all, at this point the runner has gone a farther distance than many artists do, and established a (perhaps illusory) direction simply because you can always draw a line between any two points and it will always indicate a (perhaps spurious) trend.

Looking at *The Hormone Jungle*, I don't know. I don't know about what direction the third novel might establish. I do know Reed has an extraordinary armamentarium of SF within him. For instance, what do you do about AIDS if you're at the top of a heavily industrialized

culture? What you do if you're of that plutocratic class is you let the plebs continue to traffick with your ordinary run of the body, but for you it's different. You whip out your biotechnology and create organisms not built on the double helix of DNA. Result: they can't be infected by or infect any other organisms, including you. They're expensive, they only live for a year or two, but you endow them with human intelligence and form, shape them to the human physical ideal — and beyond, in certain features —, and call them "Flowers."

The particular Flower we are concerned with here is Luscious Chiffon, a consummate courtesan. But, unlike any other Flower, Miss Chiffon has a greed for money, as distinct from the lush life, and has involved herself in a complex cyberpunkish scheme to rob her patron of a fortune. Said patron is a shady but vastly successful entrepreneur in a human culture spread all over the Solar System and fragmented into highly disparate sub-cultures populated by sometimes wildly modified humans.

This allows Reed to include some heavily picturesque individuals in his cast of characters; picturesque not only physically but in their motivations and world-views. These he backs up with a tightly reasoned rationale for why

things are how they are; as I've said before, Reed has a nonpareil science-fiction talent in this respect. He is — I am not exaggerating — on a par with Pohl or Gibson in conveying a valid gritty reality to a technology-based milieu extrapolated some considerable but valid distance from our own.

What happens to Chiffon is that her scheme, staffed by an amateur hacker and an adolescent love-struck boy — Chiffon can make anybody love-struck — comes apart catastrophically, and when we first see her she is taking refuge in a lowlife saloon, the deep wound in her thigh packed with the crystals that represent a billionaire's fortune. The wound is not a major problem — Flowers heal flawlessly, as one might expect considering some of their potential uses and re-uses — but her getaway plans are kluged and there is every reason to believe her patron is about to get on her trail. Perplexingly, Chiffon cares deeply about the possibility of her death. Better put, this bi-machine is showing an inordinate concern about its termination, but I defy you to enter her presence, even in a novel, and not immediately begin applying to her the same responses you would have to a human being emanating the total array of sexual signals she displays.

Steward, a human exiled from

his sadomasochistic warrior culture, has that happened to him. Drinking in that same saloon, what he sees in Chiffon is a vulnerable tender waif in some sort of desperate trouble, menaced, furthermore, by the saloon's human whores and pimps who have had no trouble detecting what she is. So Steward, doing what Gary Cooper or Humphrey Bogart would also do, intervenes.

And in this manner it goes on. The total scenario involves many other participants, effective individual scenes leading one into the next, and, eventually, an explanation for why this one Flower is not quite as any other. I think quite likely you might have trouble putting this book down, and at the end of it you will agree you have been told a good story. The one thing about it is that it resolves in Bogart-Monroe terms.

That is to say, in the end it is not fully science-fictional; it is of another genre. So one gets the sense that a great deal of talent has been deployed on a plot that doesn't normally require so much of it. And that's the truth.

So what we have here is a sterling example of how to do science fiction, and of how to handle language. (At random: a description from a point of view in an apartment building that is,

somewhere back in its genes, a tree:

"The Buildings don't grow anymore. The living wood is fed enough to maintain itself, no more. Broadest at their base and flat where the floaters perch, they are covered with a thick, durable bark, rough and dark, and layers of infesting vines and epiphytes and an assortment of odd parasites. Where sunlight is strongest, the outer walls resemble steep, jungled hillsides. Birds nest and rats nest and all sorts of peculiar invented creatures hide in the cracks and little holes. Just by living here, by sheer osmosis, Toby has gotten to know the local fauna. He recognizes species and sometimes individuals and wonders what they would say on Garden if they heard him tell how nature is corrupted on the corrupted old Earth.")

What we do not have is a thoroughlygoing science fiction novel in which fanatical ascetic loves machine successfully. But we do have a good novel, and an important career.

I wouldn't try to convince you Robert Reed, or Dave Wolverton, or David Zindell or Karen Joy Fowler, or the 55 other novice writers found by W.O.T.F. and published in the *L. Ron Hubbard Presents* anthologies, would have remained in the equivalent of Lincoln, Nebraska, without that intervention. I couldn't convince myself of it for a

moment.*

The thing is, L. Ron Hubbard was right when he felt there were people out there who deserved careers and weren't having them, stories SF readers ought to have available and didn't, and put his plans and sponsorship where his opinion was. It seemed like a viable thing to me, and so it has proved to be, and as one consequence I have the most gratifying editor's job in this field. I do have a twinge of regret when *F&SF* can continue to publish such people as Ray Aldridge and Rod Garcia and I can't, but on the other hand I have next year's stories beginning to accumulate in my file's right now, and I know who the next Gold Award writer is.

As for *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future*, Vol. IV, it contains 16 stories (one of them by Rod Garcia) you have never read before, and twelve of them were judged prize-winners in the contest by a panel of judges who are Greg

**Point the first, I have been in Lincoln repeatedly over the years, and not been uncharmed. Point the second, it's paradoxically necessary to believe these are inherently good writers who would have made it, or the basic premise of the talent-search is invalidated. I make these points to demonstrate my objectivity. The questions are: Did they all want to be where they were found, and how long would it have taken them to accumulate the getaway scheme?*

Benford, Ramsey Campbell, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Jerry Pournelle, Robert Silverberg, Gene Wolfe, and Roger Zelazny. As the co-ordinating judge, I send batches of stories up to them for those verdicts, and then as editor of the anthology I get to second-guess on the matter of who among the finalists should also be included. (Actually, at that point it's a matter of what will best balance the story-content in order to produce a varied reading experience of the highest attainable quality; some hard choices have to be made, and some personal favorites have to be omitted. I make the second-guess remark just because I like to tease the judges.)

There is a lot of nifty work in this book; I will not burden you or me with further encomia. There are also pertinent essays on aspects of writing by Ramsey Campbell and (ahem) me, and two reports on one of the W.O.T.F. invitational writing workshops by instructors Orson Scott Card and Tim Powers. Those will also furnish valuable clues for novice writers. Then, there is an L. Ron Hubbard essay, found in his papers, written in 1938, on the exact relationship between science fiction, science, and philosophy. He was considering the view that SF writers are in fact philosophers as distinguished from a species of

scientist, and apparently gathering his forces for doing the Golden Age fiction that first made him famous. I put it in there because in 1938 he cut through to the heart of a question that continued to be a matter of considerable debate in other quarters for years afterward, and in fact is still generally considered unresolved. Serious and constructive aficionados might do worse than to look at his answer. I think he's right.

And there is one other thing, if you don't count the new Frank Frazetta wraparound painting that graces the cover (but I think you should count it). That other thing is the presence of Frank Kelly Freas

as Director of Illustration, and the consequent inclusion of new work, illustrating the stories, by Leo and Diane Dillon, Bob Eggleton, Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Paul Lehr, Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn, Moebius, Alex Schoenburg, H.R. van Dongen, William R. Warren, Jr. and, naturally, Freas. This is something we will only be able to do once, I think; next year, I expect a return to the policy of showcasing novice illustrators, but this time we wanted to fly the flag for classic illustration modes, *pour encourager les autres*, and to remind us all that previous Golden Ages might not have been the last ones. I bring you this news [these newswes?] as a service.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

William Sleator, *The Boy Who Reversed Himself* (Dutton, Cloth, 167 pp, \$12.95); *Singularity* (Dutton, Cloth, 170 pp, \$12.95); *Into the Dream* (Scholastic/Apple, Paper, 154 pp, \$2.50) *Interstellar Pig* (Bantam/Starfire paper 196 pp. \$2.95); *Blackbriar* (Scholastic/Point, paper 217 pp. \$2.25)

TO SAY that science fiction is the literature of adolescence does not demean the field; it is high praise. Adolescent readers

are passing through a time when their conception of reality and their role within it are in flux. Everything is negotiable, everything is possible, and greatness is within their grasp. Whoever writes the literature of adolescence is creating the causal and moral universe of a generation. It isn't a trivial matter.

So it was no accident that many early science fiction novels first found hardcover publication as "juvenile fiction" — the category we now

call "young adult." The books *did* have a special appeal to adolescents. It was in my junior high library that I read science fiction classics like Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* and *Citizen of the Galaxy* and Andre Norton's *The Time Traders*, *Galactic Derelict*, *Catseye*, *The Stars Are Ours*, and *Starborn*.

Yet all these novels bear rereading even by adults. Long before Louise Fitzhugh, E.L. Konigsburg, and Judy Blume began writing "serious" young adult fiction, science fiction writers were demanding that their young readers cope with serious stories and real-life dilemmas. The readers of *Tunnel in the Sky* didn't have to deal with as much heavy symbolism as the readers of *Lord of the Flies* — but I read them both in seventh grade, and have reread both of them since, and while Golding's novel lends itself more readily to academic-literary decoding, what I cared about then — and still care about most today — is the story. What happens and why. And on that score, both novels were truthful, powerful, and important to me as I made sense of the world around me, as I decided what it meant to be a good human being.

The writer who can speak to intelligent, passionate children has the best and most important audience in the world.

Which brings me, at last, to William Sleator. Chances are that

you don't know his name. You've never seen a story of his in the genre magazines. You've never seen a book of his in the paperback section labeled Sci-Fi. Yet five, ten, fifteen years from now we're going to have an astonishing number of hot young writers in the field to whom the name "William Sleator" will be spoken with the same affection that many of us used to reserve for "Robert Heinlein" or "Andre Norton."

His writing is clean and clear. His narrative style is honed to a fine edge, so that almost nothing is included that isn't an integral part of the story — what the characters do and why they do it. He explains scientific principles with clarity and simplicity, and makes their marvels seem to be just around the corner from the lives of contemporary teenagers.

Above all, his insight into character is wise and truthful and unsentimental. His good characters often do things for reasons they're ashamed of; his antagonists are never irredeemably evil. At the end of a Sleator novel, you know more about yourself and the world around you. You've also read a hell of an entertaining tale.

Briefly, now, five Sleator books: *Singularity* is the story of twin brothers who, during a summer tending their late uncle's home, discover that the old man build a shed to enclose a

singularity, a place where time flows much faster than normal. The “younger” twin, feeling dominated by his stronger twin, sneaks to the shed one night and lives a full year in complete isolation — overnight. He emerges the next morning inches taller and, more importantly, much wiser. What makes this novel a masterpiece is the fact that Sleator doesn’t gloss over the year of isolation — we experience it with the narrator, so that we pass through his transformation with him. I can’t recommend this novel highly enough — it’s on my list of best all-time works of science fiction.

Into the Dream, an earlier work, is the tale of a boy and a girl who, though they dislike each other at school, are drawn together by the fact that they both have the same dream. To their astonishment, they discover that the dream is a memory, and that the urgent sense of danger that accompanies it is coming from still another character who was present at the scene — one whose memories are all in black and white. *Into the Dream* turns into a thriller of sorts; it also shows the “heros” serving, finally, a subordinate role as they help a still younger character discover his own potential.

In *The Boy Who Reversed Himself*, the narrator is an exploitative, selfish kid in high school who gradually learns about real friendship

and commitment form the geeky boy who just moved in next door — Omar, who passes into the fourth dimension at will. There’s only one side effect — he comes back completely reversed. The narrator quickly learns how disconcerting that can be. Most food tastes terrible to her. Catsup, however, becomes an intoxicant. She doesn’t realize how serious a business it is to travel from one dimension to another until it’s almost too late — but eventually she gets her act together. Besides creating a fine character story, Sleator manages to deal with interdimensional travel so clearly that it is actually possible to understand the experience of having to deal with *ana* and *kana*, as well as up and down, forward and back, left and right.

Interstellar Pig is not a companion volume to Jane Yolen’s *Commander Toad* series of children’s space adventures. Instead, it’s the tale of a teenager trapped into a summer on the beach by his thoughtless parents, only to get into serious trouble when he starts playing the board game called “Interstellar Pig” with the strange trio of jet-setters who move into the cottage next door. The game that becomes real is an ancient fictional tradition which can easily become a cliché — but Sleator expects you to guess very quickly that the game is real. The story is really about Barney’s desperate effort to

discover the true rules of the game so that he can win it — or at least avoid losing. Some regard this as Sleator's best work to date — it's certainly his most popular.

Blackbriar was Sleator's first novel, a ghost story in a strange old house in England. With secret passages, ancient rituals, and long-lost corpses, it's frightening enough to satisfy those who like to lie awake at night breathing hard and staring at the ceiling. It also shows that from the start of his career, Sleator was concerned with painful relationships between family members, and the struggle to heal love that has become

diseased.

All these books have passed the acid test. My nine-year-old son, Geoffrey, has become so intensely involved in the novels that he couldn't sleep; and I, about as jaded a science fiction reader as you could hope to meet, also found the novels fresh and true.

So every now and then, sidle over into the young adult section of the bookstore or library and take a look at the science fiction that will help create the next generation, not just of science fiction readers and writers, but of the next generation of Americans as well.

Coming Soon

Next month: the conclusion to *Phyllis Eisenstein's* "Beyond the Red Lord's Reach"; along with "Planesong," an unusual and moving post-holocaust story by the late *Russell Griffin*. Also, new stories by *P.E. Cunningham*, *Ron Goulart* and others.

Tentative contents for our October anniversary issue includes new stories by *Ray Bradbury*, *Lucius Shepard*, *Avram Davidson*, *Frederik Pohl*, *Wayne Wightman* and others.

Large postal rate increase and other increases in our costs will force a price increase before year end. The coupon on page 56 protects you from any price increase.

Paul Carter writes that "Joram Among the Dogs" was a "classic case of the characters taking the tale away from its author. I had written the protagonist into a corner, and the more I plotted and planned, the deeper seemed the hole I was digging him into. Then, in walked Fortunato. . . !" As you may have guessed, this is a tale of a man hopelessly imprisoned, with no possible escape. . . .

Joram among the Dogs

By Paul A. Carter

IT WAS ABSOLUTE silence of the dogs that got to him.

They ranged around him in a loose circle. When Joram ran, they loped along with him, holding their line.

They did not growl, snuffle, or bark. He couldn't even hear them pant. They slipped noiselessly past the same brush and branches that he broke under his own feet no matter how carefully he moved. When, wearying, he slowed down, they also slowed. When he stopped, they stopped. When he had had enough, they escorted him back to jail and sat outside, still holding their circle, waiting.

So long as Joram stayed within the Zone, they let him wander as he would. If he approached the row of yellow-blazed trees that marked the Zone's edge, then — and only then — they gave tongue.

If he ever crossed it, he knew what would happen.

His cellmate Jan had tried. They had swept over her in a swift and terrible wave. Brave, lovely Jan had cried out, once.

Then, quickly snarling, snapping, the dogs had driven Joram back to his cell.

Actually, it was not a cell. The small mountain cabin had neither bars on its windows nor locks on its doors. The water from the mossy well was clean, cold, and sweet; the wooden bunk bed was roomy and comfortable. Lucky city people might have spent small fortunes for vacation homes with the same kind of fieldstone fireplace and oakum-chinked walls.

But a prison is not discomfort or hardship, necessarily. A prison is simply a place one is not at liberty to leave.

The cabin held nothing written or printed, except for the labels from the food containers on the rough pine kitchen shelves. These Joram saved, in order to write his own scraps of thought — even blasphemous poetry, at times — on the reverse side.

And the nights without Jan were hideously lonely.

Today he had run, endlessly, madly, around and around the perimeter just within the line of yellow-marked trees. Now he lay, thorn-scratched, aching, and exhausted, half across the cabin's stone threshold. The dogs sat in their customary ring. In full sunlight they had been a rich rust color; in the gathering twilight they were black.

The computer terminal in the corner beeped.

To hell with it.

It beeped again, and again, and again. Each time, the tone was higher in pitch, and louder. He knew it would not quit.

A thigh muscle throbbed as Joram got up. He moved heavily to the console, sat down, and forefingered RETURN.

The beeping stopped. The archaic green screen displayed neat block letters: ARE YOU READY TO NEGOTIATE?

He typed: GET OFF MY BACK.

Promptly and silently, it replied: SYNTAX ERROR. Joram hit ERASE, typed an obscenity, and got the same reply. He groaned, erased again, and gave the computer an answer it would accept: NO.

Usually that ended the discussion. This time the machine came back with ADVISE YOU RECONSIDER. It waited. Joram's hand approached the keys, but he did not touch them.

After a moment's pause the message moved to the top of the screen, and beneath it a new sentence winked into view:

IN TOTAL ISOLATION PROBABILITY OF MAJOR PSYCHOTIC EPISODE IS 87%.

Joram was surprised at the ploy's crudeness. He had thought of that possibility, of course. He also knew that in the historic past, prisoners had survived far worse. Feeling almost playful, he typed: REMEMBER THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO.

The computer ignored his reply. Quietly, he got up from the console. Alerted by the sudden absence of his body weight, the monitor resumed its frantic beeping. *That's enough*, Joram decided. He carried firewood over and piled it in the chair until its weight was enough to shut the signal off. This time he did not press RETURN. He walked deliberately across the hardwood floor, picked up his double-bitted ax, and swung.

The green screen imploded into ruin. Joram swung again and again, cursing and laughing and crying. Then he stopped and got his breath under control while he carefully unbolted the console from the floor and disconnected the cable that curved up into the wall and thence to its rooftop power source. Panting, he dragged the wrecked instrument out the door and around the building's corner. *Too far to the garbage pit when I'm this beat*, Joram thought; *I'll take it there tomorrow*. Instead, he stripped, drew up a bucket of icy well water, and poured it over his head and body. Then another bucketful and another. Afterward, drained and contented as he had not been since his last love-time with Jan, he stumbled back into the cabin, dropped onto the bunk bed and let sleep overtake him.

He woke to the unexpected crackle of fireplace flames.

A stout, florid man dressed all in black was sitting in the rocker by the hearth.

Shocked fully awake, Joram swung his feet to the floor and sat up.

"Good morning." The stranger's voice was deep and full; the voice of one used to speaking in public to large audiences, but modulated now to the needs of a single listener in a small room. Firelight glinted from a decoration on his capacious chest — a cross, Joram realized in sudden rage. *They brought in a priest to do their dirty work* — one quick bound brought him halfway across the room, hands raised to strike.

A pudgy hand accustomed to command gestured that he stop, and — to his own surprise — Joram stopped.

"I'm Father Fortunato," the large man introduced himself, and offered his hand. His clasp was surprisingly firm.

Fortunato! The name was a legend throughout the Imperium. Itinerant preacher in World-City's slums; medical missionary on far frontier planets'

icy deserts and fevered jungles; chaplain in the Imperial Space Fleet, hero of a dozen battles, and finally private confessor to the emperor himself — and then the priest had rocked the galaxy by denouncing the Imperium from the pulpit of World-City's great cathedral. Caught completely by surprise, Detention and Prevention forces had lost him in the riot that followed, and he had disappeared into the Free Underground.

"I'm honored," Joram managed to respond, and as he said the words, a dark, sickening flash detonated in his mind: *Then they've caught you, too! They're going to catch us all.* And, a heartbeat later: *You've been bought, and this is a trick.*

Priests, if they are good at their job, learn how to read faces. "There is no reason you should trust me," Fortunato acknowledged, heaving his considerable bulk up out of the chair. "But we can talk about that later. You have a fine place here, son, but it needs a bit of housekeeping — and I think we'll start right now." He picked up the broom that stood beside the door, and began vigorously to sweep. Dust rose; Joram coughed. "Look at this — *cobwebs!*" Fortunato chided, poking up into a roof corner with the broom handle — and something small and shining fell to the floor. The priest mouthed the word *bug* as he crunched it under his heavy foot.

Joram took the hint. Coughing again — and he didn't have to playact; the stirred dust in the room was thick — he rose from the bunk bed and crossed to the door. "Got to get some fresh air," he mumbled, and stepped outside.

Growls met them as they left the cabin. Three of the dogs loped over and sniffed at the newcomer. "Down," Fortunato snapped, and, astonishingly, they fell back. Boldly, he walked to the edge of the clearing; warily, Joram followed. The hounds smoothly formed up their circle and fell in step.

"Now I think we can talk," Joram volunteered.

"I hope so. They could track us with remote sensors — we'll have to take that chance. To answer the obvious questions first: yes, I was caught. People who think they lead charmed lives can get careless. And, yes, they offered me a deal. They told me you had lost your companion" — an arm squeeze conveyed sympathy, without empty words of condolence — "and I was supposed to move in with you, console you, listen to your grief, and trap you into giving up the information they want."

"I don't know what that is, exactly," the old freedom fighter went on, "and I don't want to. I possess another scrap of it, and you don't want to know what *that* is. Each fraction of the whole is meaningless to the Free

Underground member who has been entrusted with it, and none of us knows how many such sharers of the Secret there are. It's not factual data of the ordinary sort, or they would have scanned or drugged it out of us long since. From my studies in patristic philosophy, I suspect it's something on the interface between abstract mathematics and sheer mysticism, and it has to be willingly shared and taught."

Joram kicked at a dead branch. "So they isolate anyone they capture, and try to make us willing."

"Exactly. They probably thought you and your young woman — and I am truly sorry for whatever happened, son — would share your fragments of the Secret in apparent privacy, while they listened. With me they tried, uh, sexual temptation, with one of their agents." The priest smiled wryly. "They should have known that in my business, you learn immunity to that particular temptation early, or you don't survive."

They had come to a mossy glen about halfway to the edge of the Zone. Joram stopped, struck by something so obvious it had never occurred to him before: "Why aren't all holders of the Secret just told to kill themselves if captured?"

"A good point. Ex officio, I know more of the overall situation than most of us — enough to know that one day the Free Underground will have need to use the Secret, not to hide it. Indeed, the simplest solution for the Imperium might be simply to hunt down and kill as many of us as it can — except that they want to use the Secret also."

"What stakes could possibly be that high—"

Fortunato looked at him, eye to eye, and spoke with quiet seriousness: "The existence of the cosmos, my son."

Neither spoke again until they came to the line of splash-painted trees at the Zone's edge. The dogs deployed, to block their way, bellies close to the ground, tails flat, throats rumbling. Joram sighed. "This is the way it is, Father — every day."

"Then we may as well go back." Abruptly, Fortunato about-faced and set off at a brisk pace for the cabin.

New, shiny stacks of food cartons stood on the kitchen table when the men returned. "They've been here again," Joram muttered.

"Careful, son — paranoia is an occupational hazard, even when the persecution is real."

No new console stood in the old one's place. On a hunch, Joram

stepped outside and looked around the building's corner. The smashed computer had been carried off — and the ground neatly brushed over where it had lain. "I guess they're tired of playing that game," Joram surmised.

"Quite so," murmured Fortunato, who had followed him outside. "I'm sure the house has been rebugged, and this time it will be harder to find. The Imperium may try a more casual approach — let the Secret come out in ordinary conversation while we're doing the dishes or playing checkers." A quirky, boyish grin lighted up the priest's jowly features. "I think we're going to spend a lot of time outdoors," he declared, slapping his paunch. "It should be good for my condition, anyhow."

They rustled up a late breakfast; Fortunato made the sign of the cross over it, and Joram raised no objection. The rattle of dishes pushed back the loneliness. *I was going out of my mind*, the younger man reflected. *Imperium, you've made your first big mistake; you nearly had me.*

The conversation in the cabin was subtly and brilliantly constructed. Fortunato had once been a staunch partisan of the Imperium; thus he was able plausibly to sing its praises, just as he had been sent to do. Joram's part was harder. He had to fence convincingly, parrying the priest's gambits as if they were seriously intended. After two hours of this, they took an exercise break — Joram learning, to his chagrin, that the fat man could not only keep up with him but could actually outjog him — and when they reached the edge of the Zone, Joram asked, "How do you think we're doing?"

"Not bad," the priest answered. "We can keep up that sort of chatter for days — weeks, if necessary. But I am afraid that if we don't give them some results, they'll take me off your case." *And then I'll be alone again*; Joram completed the thought.

Fortunato's ruddy face beamed impishly. "I think we'd better give them some distraction. Let's say — a jailbreak."

"I thought your church didn't believe in suicide."

"We don't, but there's a difference between suicide and a calculated risk. First of all, we've got to learn more about this place than you've been able to. Is it a forest reserve on an otherwise settled planet? Or is it a closed environment, like the traditional L-5s, suspended in orbit? I rather doubt that; movement of a sun and clouds as we see them above the cabin are pretty hard to fake, although, God knows, the Imperium can be ingenious."

They walked back to and past the cabin, continuing on through the brushy growth behind the well. It was not Joram's usual route, and the

dogs growled at the change in routine. Again it was Fortunato who settled them down. Almost out to the Zone edge on the far side, the priest hand-signaled a stop under a tall, thick tree.

Joram had never before tried to climb it; the lowermost branches were beyond his reach. However, if he kicked off his shoes and gripped the deep bark corrugations with fingers and toes, the same way a rock climber uses the microscopic steps in a cliff — with a boost up from Fortunato—

The moss was soft under his bare feet. One of the dogs moaned, but none interfered. Joram scrambled a man's length up the trunk, hooked an arm over the lowest branch, pulled himself up, and got a leg over —beyond any dog's leaping reach. That action ignited a pandemonium of yelps and cries. But as both his feet gripped the branch and he stood erect against the trunk, the noise ended —instantly, as if on signal.

The priest's normally serene face showed a flicker of apprehension as he motioned Joram to climb still higher. This was not hard, for beyond his perch the branches were not so far apart. Spruce sap stuck to his shirt and hands. The trunk narrowed as Joram climbed, until it was swaying with his weight. Nearly within reach, a thick hardwood trunk slanted toward him from another tree — whose base was rooted just on the other side of the Zone.

Still the dogs were silent. Were they under distant control? Or were they on their own as a well-trained team? On the answer to those questions turned the possible success or inevitable failure of Fortunato's plan.

Joram estimated his chances, waved a hand to catch Fortunato's attention, and pointed toward the other tree.

The priest nodded. Very casually, with an ambling motion, he began to walk in the direction of the cabin. The dogs, in no haste, got up and began to circle him. Fortunato kept on walking across the springy moss.

Joram gathered himself for a spring—

One of the dogs gave a short, peremptory bark, like a command.

Half of them peeled off, like ancient fighter planes from a squadron, and took up station beneath Joram's tree. The others, forming a tighter ring, stayed with Fortunato.

Damn!

The priest stopped, turned, came back. His dog guardians came with him. As they reached Joram's tree, one ring of hounds touched and merged with the other.

"Well, Father, it was a good try." Joram started to come down.

And in the fourth direction, toward “north” — Joram gasped. . .

Fortunato checked him. “Now that you’re up there, you might as well take a good look around.”

Joram levered himself upward so that his head broke through the crown of spicy needles.

The treetops, from that height, seemed an uneven carpet of shrubbery, punctuated by holes. Some of the tops stirred in a light wind. On two sides the leafy mass stretched away, dwindling toward the horizon; on the third side — “westward,” if this sun’s rising and setting gave meaning to compass point conventions — the green carpet slanted gently downward, deepening in the distance toward a shallow “V” — a river valley? And in the fourth direction, toward “north” — Joram gasped.

It rose, tier on tier, a great latticework against the sky. Skinny buttresses sprang from its upper layers and curved wildly over the forest before plunging to earth, their foundations hidden in the trees. The swooping, leaping — arches? walkways? — were starkly black; the super trellis behind them glowed inwardly with ivory and rose. It had to be of the Imperium, but — *My God*, Joram had to admit, *the damned thing was beautiful*.

From down below, Fortunato called: “What can you see up there?”

Heaven, Joram almost answered. “Wait, I’ll tell you,” he countered, and began to scramble down the tree.

They sat by the great trunk while Joram talked. The priest’s face grew grave, even wrathful. “I see,” he said at last, in a tone one of his calling might use when hearing a confession.

“See what?” Joram shot back irritably.

“The Free Underground has been expecting this, son. The Imperium tolerated my church for a long time because they believed — mistakenly — that we would always be a prop to any political status quo. God knows, we often were, in times past. But it was only a matter of time before they concocted a church of their own.”

Joram searched his memory for scraps of history. Egypt . . . Japan . . . “Emperor worship?”

“No. Worse. I’ve had evidence for some while that the Ministry for

Enlightenment was designing and financing a new cult; one for whose worshipers the Imperium *itself* is God."

"But why here?"

"Why not? A holy shrine, within view of a chamber for breaking the spirit of dissidents. It's happened before." Fortunato smiled bleakly. "After all, we used to have our Inquisition."

Joram picked up a clod of earth and lobbed it over at the circle of dogs. It broke against one dark haunch in a puff of dust. The animal got up, moved a foot away, and quietly lay down. "I don't see that this helps us much with our immediate problem."

"You don't see yet, do you? . . . Son, we are *meant* to go to the place you have just seen." The priest got to his feet. "And we must, but not on their terms."

Escorted by the great dark hounds, they returned to their cabin. Fed and rested — *when and what do the dogs eat!* Joram wondered for the dozenth time — the two men set out early the next morning for the edge of the Zone, this time bearing axes and a saw. They marked dead trees and branches along an eye-sighted straight line that began and ended at the yellow-spotted boundary arc. Then they began to chop, trim, and slash. *The Imperium watches us, Joram thought; surely it will figure out what we are doing, and stop us.* But the dogs merely held their damnable circle, moving from tree to falling tree with the men.

Joram in his captivity had tried to stay fit, but he had never before had the incentive to work this hard. As the sun sank behind the trees, and the piles of brush and cut branches grew, the pains throbbed and lanced through his back, along his shoulders, out to his untoughened hands. The priest beside him was puffing and gasping; but Fortunato was also getting twice as much done.

Scarlet sunset filtered through the lower trunks. Joram lowered the heavy ax and unkinked his arm. "Shouldn't we be heading back before it gets any darker?"

"I'm heading back. You stay here," Fortunato commanded; and at once, dropping the tree saw on a cut stump, he started off. With military precision the dogs split into squads, half with Joram, half with Fortunato.

The air quickly grew cold. No longer exercising, Joram felt the chill strike to his bones. A wind rose, swaying the treetops; and even in the forest shelter, its icy breath cut his flesh.

Downcast and weary, he could not resist a smoldering irritation with the fellow prisoner who had left him here — an irritation that deepened into suspicion. Surely the man must be an agent of the clever and infinitely cruel Imperium! In the gathering gloom, Joram's hand groped for the ax handle.

Yellow light, flickering and bobbing through the darkness, came into view before he could see Fortunato again. A pine torch, Joram realized, and hope flared as he grasped his cellmate's plan.

The priest and the dogs emerged from the near-blackness, accompanied by a rising gust of frigid air. Fortunato motioned to Joram, who got up with a groan of pain and followed him, facing the wind.

They came to the brush pile they had laid just where their sight line intersected the edge of the Zone. Fortunato knelt on the cold forest floor and thrust the torch into a mass of dry weeds. Flame shot through the stiff, dead stalks. The priest moved along to the next slash pile, inward from the Zone boundary — and the next.

Suddenly, searing heat rolled toward them, shoving back the cold. Flame shot upward, catching needle clusters in a spray of angry light. Dogs yelped in terror. Their circle tightened, and they broke into a lope; the two men had to run to stay within the animate ring—

— and the fire reached the other end of the line and crossed the Zone frontier.

The dogs paused, growling and whining. Their circle was ragged, but it held.

And now the rising wind swept flames forward through the ground cover. A leaping canine figure rose against the oncoming bonfire, fell, and shrank back before the fire's hot force, snarling.

Cautiously, faces toward the fire, hands over mouths to screen the smoke, Fortunato and Joram stepped backward — through thick, already crisping moss; over a decaying, punky log; around a mass of clinging briars—

— and past the arc of yellow-marked trees, and out of the Zone.

The great hounds grumbled deep in their chests and bared their teeth. Sparks shot forward; one of the dogs howled in pain as smoke curled from a singed patch of hair. Slowly, stubbornly, pressed by roaring red and yellow tongues, the entire circle gave way, as if in rearguard battle against an overwhelming enemy.

We've made it. Joram did not quite dare to say the words aloud.

Fortunato called out to the dogs, and walked among them, stroking here

a muzzle, there an ear. Then, in abrupt about-face, he started a double-time trot in the direction away from the fire. Joram, all his fatigue washed away in the ecstasy of escape, fell into step behind him. And the dogs, no longer silent, leaped and cavorted and *bayed*, like hunting hounds. The rumble of the great fire, the pop and hiss of burning cones, made it a scene from the *Inferno*.

Men and dogs fairly flew over the dark earth. The wind went down as swiftly as it had arisen — *it have been that close*, Joram thought — and their ears told them they were outdistancing the fire.

Then it started to rain.

There were no preliminary drops, no warning wave of moist air. In one shocking instant the water came crashing down in sheets, as if a faucet had turned — *which in a sense it had*, Joram knew, overpowered by disappointment. The Imperium hadn't missed a trick. The drenching rain would quench the fire, and then the dogs would herd them over the wet, smoking ashes, back into the Zone, back to the cabin — if it still stood.

"Good try," he called out, dashing the wetness from his hair.

"More than a try," the priest replied. "Look over there."

Through the rolling ground fog loomed the soaring dark arches of the Temple, backlighted in deep red and palest gold. One great arch came to earth a scant dozen meters from where they stood. Packed dirt ringed its night-black base. A step or two away, glimmering pale blue against the dark trees, a tall, narrow, flat-topped structure stood like a sentry box. On the side facing the buttress, an open, yawning entryway broke the otherwise smooth symmetry.

Out of that entry stepped a tall, cowed figure, its body shrouded in brown folds except for the feet, which were bare. It leaned on a staff that had a long, jagged point. With quick, ground-covering strides, loping along with the help of the staff, this apparition crossed the open space to the base of the arch, and stepped somehow *inside*.

Joram flinched from a bright, eye-searing flash like that of a photocopying machine. For moments afterward he was blind. In the first instant he thought he had seen the robed stranger shoot upward, like a fish leaping a stream.

"Matter transcaster," Fortunato whispered, pointing at the glowing blue structure. "We've known they had them, of course. That's how the Imperial Space Fleet won the Battle of the Horsehead Nebula — they transcast marine combat units directly into the enemy's command center. But this other unit" — he gestured at the upflinging buttress — "must be something new.

Come on, son; we'll have to follow him."

"Now wait a minute!" Joram exploded. He had been pushed, badgered, chivied one time too many. "The Imperium has never stopped watching us — they know exactly where we are now. So you want us to charge right into the lion's mouth?"

"That is precisely what the lion does not expect. Come!" Fortunato's heavy hand clamped on Joram's wrist, and tugged. Perforce, the younger man stumbled forward. The ever-present dogs trotted in pace with the men.

They came to the arch. Near at hand, its black was not solid opaqueness; it was a gaping vacuum—

Brilliant light flared forth. A tingling flood washed over Joram like an electric shower bath. Afterimages danced in his skull as his body surged, up, up, upward; only once, in a World-City express elevator, had he ever felt anything remotely like this. Then, with a sickening angular shift, the great arch curved away from the vertical and he was rocketing forward into the Temple's rose and gold maze. Forward and down, in stomach-curdling deceleration; and then, knees nearly buckling under him, Joram stood in a great circular plaza that was ringed by fountains of pulsing violet fire.

Fortunato's hand, still gripping his, pulled sharply. Joram took an involuntary step forward. The priest pointed; they — and their ominipresent dark dogs — were following the brown-robed figure they had first glimpsed at the edge of the forest.

Now, as the rush of air faded from his ears, Joram became conscious of the music. It flooded the great hall; it beat in upon them from all sides, rose from under the floor, pealed and clamored from the invisible, gold-smoky heights above. It was the blare of a score of horns, the thunder of a hundred drums, the sensuous swish of a thousand violins. And it was the triumphant chant of a host of voices: "*Gloria . . . gloria . . . gloria in excelsis Imperio!*" The priest's face darkened and his jaw set as he heard that last word.

Then Joram noticed the other people — many others, scattered far apart on the vast polished floor with its flickering purple reflections. Some wore the same monkish garb as the one they had seen emerge from the transcaster. Many, however, wore more conventional clothing — the pastel business garb of salespeople; the rough coveralls of maintenance workers; the loudly colored singlets and kilts of folk on holiday; the trim blue and silver of the Fleet; the stiff, crusted livery of the State. By contrast, here and there in the crowd were men in formal dinner dress and women in sweeping, floor-

length gowns. Quite a number were attired in beachwear, and a few — save for multicolored body paint and hair dyes — were nude.

Nearby, a winking flash announced the arrival of another pilgrim — a diminutive fat man in purple leotards overlaid by flaring yellow shorts! The newcomer looked around in bewilderment that turned to awe. "They come from all walks of life," Fortunato marveled. "This is much, much further along than I thought."

Watching the absurd, vivid little man trudge purposefully across the glistening floor, Joram became aware that the people in the Temple were in motion. Long lines of them curved and crossed each other like countermarching musicians on parade. Here a line of pilgrims rippled through a series of S turns; farther off, pivoting through an acute angle, marched a file of men in black — "My God!" Joram cried out. "They're D & P!"

Fortunato's big body tensed. "Ready, my son — be ready for anything." He hand-signaled the dogs to their feet.

The line of Detention and Prevention troops came on and on, snapping through their turn one after another like robots and marching off in virtually the opposite direction. The base of their V pointed straight at Joram, Fortunato, and the dogs. Surely one pair of trained eyes, swinging through the pivot, must spot them soon —

"... *in excelsis Imperio*," the chorus thundered on.

"We have seen quite enough." Fortunato clutched at his pectoral cross and spoke rapidly into what Joram realized, in a wild flash of hope, was a transmitter: "Home in on me; coordinates as you have tracked them. Small arms only; the place is filled with civilians. But it's also crawling with D & P's — *hit 'em!*"

Overhead, a rushing, as of great wings!

Winking stars popped into existence all over the great dome, and as each one faded, its space was filled by a fighting man or woman in a red tunic, suspended from a backpack-balloon and cradling a machine rifle, a belt of grenades, or a simple spear. The invaders paused in the heights, each seeking out a target on the floor. Then, as one, hands pulled at rip cords — air hissed from their floaters — and they *pounced!*

Too late, the Detention and Prevention forces saw their danger. Their precision march halted abruptly. Before they could converge into battle formation, the red-clad intruders were upon them, slashing, cutting, shooting. The grand music swept insensately on ("*et in terra pax ... pax ...*

pax"), punctuated now by the whine of high-velocity metallic slugs and the hollow crump of minibombs. The worshipers' ranks broke, and the pilgrims pelted away in wild disorder. Abruptly the music stopped, and in its wake the Temple echoed with shrieks, war cries, and anguished screams. The imitation Heaven had become transformed into an even more convincing Hell.

A D & P squad leader ducked and thrust upward; his assailant collapsed on top of him. He flung the lifeless body to one side and, looking around, caught sight of the circle of dogs. He barked a command. In the next instant a crossbow quarrel caught him in the throat. But others had heard. Elbowing panicky pilgrims aside, a dozen Detentioners converged on the spot, unleashing their electric stun guns. *They want us alive*, Joram thought.

Fortunato's eyes locked with those of the nearest dogs. Then: "Get them!" he shouted.

The hounds leaped, jaws snapping in fury! D & P's went down writhing, dark muzzles tearing at their faces.

A red-uniformed warrior, breathing hard, rushed up to Fortunato past the grimly busy hounds and saluted. The priest returned the salute with military snap. "Over here, sir — we've set up a transcaster transfer point." Fortunato nodded, and whistled to the dogs. They left off their bloody work and trotted after him like obedient puppies. Joram stumbled along in the center of their circle. His longtime jailers had become an escort.

"The Imperium made a mistake — programming them the way it did," Fortunato panted as they raced across the floor. "Forgot — animals aren't like machines — you can win them over—"

A shimmering, out-of-focus blur marked the mattercaster nexus. Their red-uniformed guide stepped to one side. "Hurry, sir; the D & P's are bound to counterattack."

Fortunato gestured to the dogs.

"Sir?"

"They go with us." The priest spoke softly, coaxingly. Whining, reluctant, sniffing, one by one the hounds leaped through the transfer circle, each triggering a puff of light. "All right, son. You're next—"

"Joram!"

From the milling, confused, and frightened throng of pilgrims, a dark-haired young woman rushed at Joram, her arms flung wide.

The man's heart pounded in wild, unlooked-for joy.

"Jan — oh, my love —"

The priest stepped between them, shaking his head. "This is not Jan."

"Like *hell* she's not!" Joram exploded. Those fine eyes and coloring had to be Jan's, and he knew every contour of that vibrant young body. She wore the same corduroy slacks and open-throated shirt that she had when —

When the dogs took her down.

Frozen, Joram let Fortunato push him gently backward. The priest's face was sorrowful. "Joram — Jan is dead. This is an exact clone. They can do that, you know, if the mortal clay be fresh enough. An exact duplicate, cell for cell — lacking only the soul."

"He's lying!" the woman cut in. "Joram, lover — the man's an Imperial agent. Do you think he just *happened* to be wearing a broadcasting unit — which they never searched him for?" And she ducked under Fortunato's barrier arm, slipped around the priest, and crushed her body against Joram's. Mouth upon mouth, they kissed hungrily, and Joram knew with sweet, explosive, erotic certainty that his Jan had come back to him.

Then Jan's hands released their hold. With a sigh, she slid downward and sprawled on the floor. Fortunato, his forearm still in karate position, stepped over the unconscious form. "I am sorry, my son."

Joram at once stepped into an unarmed-combat position. It was an impasse. They were evenly matched, the younger man's speed against the priest's strength. A sleep-dart whizzed over their heads. From the corner of his eye, Joram glimpsed two — no, three — Detentioners closing in. Shaking with grief and rage, Joram fought for calm. His leg muscles tensed for a skull-shattering kick —

And from his other side, a red-uniformed shoulder slammed into him. He staggered and struggled for balance. Fortunato shoved — and Joram was in the transcaster's focus.

Brilliant light lanced through him; the floor underneath him vanished. He dropped a knee's length through space, and his feet struck a lower, rougher surface that was softened with grass.

Fortunato crouched near him, still ready, still wary. The dogs, their russet coats dulled in the light from a gray, overcast sky, waited in their eternal circle. They all, men and dogs, stood in the midst of an open field. Pale grass and a few feathery bushes punctuated its bareness. The air had a damp chill, and the farther scene was shrouded in clinging fog.

"Where are we?" Joram demanded. "As if you would tell me."

"I don't know, son. I honestly don't know, save that it is a habitable planet not yet under the Imperium's sway. Our transcaster, within those limits, sent us in a random direction. It is a vast galaxy, much of it yet unexplored, and neither Detention and Prevention nor the Free Underground now knows where we are."

"I don't — I *can't* believe you."

"Joram." The priest stepped closer; the young man was poised to strike. "Joram, listen to me. The being you thought was Jan asked you why I just happened to be wearing this." He touched the pectoral cross. "But since she was not in hearing distance when I made my call to the Free Underground, how did *she* know what this instrument was?" He raised a hand to check Joram's reply. "It is a very difficult double game I have had to play — freedom fighter and pretended spy. Many brave men and women are dying back there" — pointing generally at the foggy sky — "to spoil the Imperium's state-cult at its birth."

Emotion drained out of Joram. His body relaxed from its martial-arts stance. "Father, I think I owe you an apology."

"No, my son. That — imitation would have had all of your Jan's brain

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cells, encoded with all of her and your experiences together. She could plausibly have taken up where you and the real Jan left off, and you would have been recruited into the Imperium all unawares."

"And then — they would have had my part of the Secret."

"No. Not that. No duplicate person, no matter how perfect, has ever been able to receive or to give a Secret share. It's something at the mysterious edge of consciousness — which, incidentally, supports my church's belief in an unduplicable personal essence, or soul."

Joram's mind whirled. *The soul, the man said. But we know each other only in our bodies — and that kiss, no mistake, was Jan's.* "Father, how do you know you can trust me?"

"Revolutionaries are always being betrayed by their comrades. My church started that way, you know. Yet revolutionaries must also risk forming bonds of absolute trust, for that is the way of revolutions. The real problem is whether one can trust oneself." A hound whimpered. "Come, let's move out. The dogs are hungry, and we must see what this country yields in forage." He started briskly to walk; Joram and the circle of necessity moved with him. And they marched on, Joram and Fortunato and the dogs, on their way toward changing the course of history.

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"Natural Selection," a refreshingly different tale that manages to be both caustic and romantic, is from a new writer who tells us that he is forty-seven years old, married, has a son in college, holds a couple of patents and has always written, though this is his first sale. Mr. White currently works for a New York literary agent.

Natural Selection

By Robert White

S MILE AT A man on the street — and you're dead! Now, what do I mean by that?" Ms. Dorski paused. She was said to be tough but fair, and she liked that. Maybe too protective. But she liked that, too. In all her years at the Institute, they said, she had never lost a student. "Well, for example," she continued, "if you smile at a man on the street, the next thing you are likely to know is, you are up against a wall with his legs between your knees, and his hands upon your bosom. *That's* what we mean by *dead*. Now let me hear that from you. Class? Smile . . . ?"

"Dead," the class said as one.

"That's correct," Ms. Dorski said. "Ms. Green? What's wrong? You looked a little uncertain there."

"I don't know," Ms. Green said defensively. "It just seems like, I mean, why not? What if a guy says something real funny or something, and you can't help yourself?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Ms. Green said, a little sullenly. "*Anything*."

"All right," Ms. Dorski said scornfully. "Here's a classic example. You see a man, and he's coming down the street toward you. Let's say he's cute, O.K.? At least *he* thinks he's cute. Fifty feet away, he already has his hands on your behind, and he's giving you The Look. Not the whole close-up look — just a kind of feeler. Checking you out. What do you do first, Green?"

"I look away and up in the air about thirty degrees?"

"Good. At least you remember that much. Now listen to me. Thirty feet away, he steps in some dog stuff. Don't laugh; it happens! So he stops then, and blushes, and looks down at the bottom of his shoe. What's next? Ms. Sutton?"

"While he's looking at his shoe, I check him out. He can't see me, because men can't focus on two things at the same time."

"Right. Good, Sutton. Now, the man realizes he's blown his whole image: the haircut, the jeans, the walk — they're nothing. *He* knows it, and he also knows *you* know it. What's his next move?"

"Boyish grin," said Green, without being asked.

"Very good, Ms. Green. Now, suppose that happens to strike you as funny? I mean, suppose you *let* it strike you that way, and you just smile back for a split second without thinking about it? What happens next?"

"Uh, I'm dead?" Green did a little shuffle in place uneasily.

"Describe that for us, Ms. Green."

"Well, he's got his knee between my legs, and he's mauling my boobs, I guess."

"You guess, Ms. Green? Is that all you can do, is *guess*? Ms. Green, if you don't pay attention in this class, you're going to be packaged *meat* out there! Class? Anybody? Why does this man throw you a boyish grin? My goodness, this is so basic. Yes, Ms. Hammett?"

"It's one of his basic ploys," Hammett said.

"I know that," Ms. Green said defensively. "But I mean, with the dog poop and all, how do you know he doesn't really mean it? Or sometimes, anyway?"

The class laughed merrily, and Ms. Dorski shook her head and smiled pityingly at Ms. Green. "Ms. Hammett," Dorski nodded at her, "will you please tell our *bimbo* here just why the boyish grin is always a phony in this situation? Wait! As a matter of fact, let's just say it all together for Ms. Green's benefit. Class?"

"Because men don't care how bad they smell," the class chorused in glee.

Green could've just died, she was so embarrassed. Ms. Dorski went over and patted Green lightly on the shoulder as though to say, It's all right. . . . Basic training is where anyone can make a mistake. *Once*. Then she said, "All right now, class. One last topic, and then we'll be going out in the field for your first run through the real thing. Remember, you must stay with your friend at all times. If questioned, say, "She's my sister-in-law," or else say, "We're shopping for the convent." Remember, those will be real males out there, and they don't belong to you. This is as close to the real thing as you will get until you've completed Intermediate and go out on your own alone. Now, please pay attention, as this is the last item on our review." Ms. Dorski cleared her throat peremptorily, and began to read from her review and question list.

"Two unknown males approach you and your friend. They're not bad, but they're not great, either—"

"Excuse me, Ms. Dorski. Could you tell us what kind of shoes they're wearing?"

"That's all right, Ms. Wilson. Good question. I'll make it difficult. Let's say one of them is wearing aquamarine high-tops, and the other is wearing loafers. I'll say, oh . . . penny loafers. Have you all got that? Now, they're coming toward you, and High-Tops comes on first. What do we call that? What is High-Tops's position?"

"Scout," said several women at once.

"That's correct," Ms. Dorski smiled approvingly. "Now, Mr. High-Tops stops in front of you and says, 'Hi.' That's all he says. Now, how do you respond? Ms. Hammett, you seem to have studied this material — what's your answer?"

"Well, if all he says is just 'Hi' — I just look at my friend, and she's supposed to look back at me."

"Be specific, Ms. Hammett? What kind of look do you exchange?"

"Uh, knowing. Bored and knowing."

"Good. Now, Mr. Penny Loafers will be taking the role of Cavalry, and he will be the heavy hitter. He'll say something like, 'Where're you girls going?' Or possibly he'll use the inversion of that and say, 'It looks like we're going the same way as you. How about if we go along with you?' Then if he knows his stuff, he'll half-block your way so you'll have to

acknowledge his existence — sort of. . . . And what is your response?"

"Flick your head with annoyance and ask him a double-bind question," said Ms. Wilson.

"Be specific," demanded Ms. Dorski. "Give an example."

"Do you *mind*?" said Ms. Wilson in her hardest, flattest voice, with her coldest, sneering glare.

"That's very good, Ms. Wilson. I see you've been working on that glare. Now I want to hear from someone else. Who'll give me another example of a double-bind question for men?"

"What do you think you're doing?" young Ms. Rothman answered hesitantly.

"Not for an Approach," said Ms. Dorski firmly. "That question should be saved for closer, more difficult situations where his breathing is fast, say after First Feel. Anybody else with a double-binder? We're not leaving this room until I hear some more."

"What makes you think I care *where* you're going?"

"Well, mezzo-mezzo, Ms. Hammett. That's really too complicated for most males. Either he'll write you off as some kind of intellectual, or he'll pat your fanny. Try to be simple and direct. It's all they understand."

"Don't you even know where you're going?"

"Can't you see we don't want you around us?"

"All right. I've heard enough. Apparently, we're as ready as we're ever going to be. Now, let's just have one last makeup check, and then we'll be off. Does everyone remember who her friend is now? Ms. Hammett? I've changed my mind on you. I want you to go with Ms. Wilson instead of Ms. Green." Ms. Dorski's look brooked no defiance as she said, "Ms. Green? I'm taking you with *me*."

BUT MR. Worth? How do we know if they really like what we're saying to them, or they're just being snotty some way we can't understand?"

"Eye roll, Johnson. We covered this in Body Language. Maybe you were out that day. Anyway, no matter *what* she says, and I cannot stress this enough — when her eyes roll up; like this, see? — you've scored. Just for the heck of it, to see if any of you guys have actually been listening, what do you do after you score an eye roll? Anybody?"

"Touch her casually above the waist," said Spinelli.

"And lock eyes again as soon as you can," added Fisher.

"Right," said Mr. Wright approvingly. "Now I realize you men want to go out there and get women, but before you take a single step out of this room, you've got to convince *me* you're not simply going to screw things up for the next guy, and. . . ."

"Mr. Worth? Can I ask you another question about eye rolls?"

"What is it, Frederick?"

"How many eye rolls should we score before we use the first 'I-think-I'm-in-love-with-you'?"

"At least four, Fredrickson. Five or even six is better. By five, nobody's counting anymore anyway, if you know what I mean."

The class laughed appreciatively and relaxed.

"Mr. Worth, would you go over that part about the Morning After, again?"

"Well, you've got some brass confidence, Harrison. I like that. But remember, you're still not through with Basics, and I don't want you to be getting too far ahead of yourself here. Yes, Stewart, what is it?"

"Well, sometimes I feel guilty when I tell a girl I love her when I don't, and I say it just to score. Do I have an attitude problem, Mr. Worth?"

"What the hell kind of question is *that*, Stewart?" Mr. Worth looked almost distressed. "Of course you've got an attitude problem. You're not going to fool any woman who's not in a coma with *that* song and dance. Remember, men, if you can't lie sincerely, don't even bother. Just say something like, 'I really like your body,' and let it go at that. Believe me, she'll take it from there. Yes, what is it now, Fredrickson?"

"I want to follow up on Stewart's question. Is it better to say you're not ready to make a commitment, or should you just say you're engaged to somebody who's out of town?"

"Hmmm." Mr. Worth paced a few steps to his left and lowered his head in momentary thought. "There are two schools of thought on this question. For myself, I think it's better to say you're engaged to somebody else. Or even, that you're on the rebound from a really serious affair and you can't handle your feelings too well right at the moment. Women buy that, because they think it's such a big deal to give in to you, and also, they get inspired by competition when they know some other woman is already on your case." Mr. Worth paused again and paced back to his original place deliberately. "On the other hand, lots of guys want women to know

they're available, but not easy to catch. In general, use the approach that works best for you. What you feel comfortable with. Just two things: Don't suggest you're ready to settle down, and never, never say, 'Huh!'"

The men smiled at each other, and then returned their trusting attention to Mr. Worth, who was easily the best damned coach in the place.

"Is *frottage* a worthwhile approach, Mr. Worth?"

"Harrison, I like the way your mind works, but no. Did you all hear Mr. Harrison's question about the French method of rubbing against women in public places? To be honest, Harrison, it works less than 5 percent of the time, and then usually only on French women old enough to be your mother. Of course, if that's your thing, go do it, but for the most part, it's a waste of time. Anyone else? Any more questions? No? Well, I have one thing to say, so listen up, because the faster we get through this, the sooner you guys can get into the hunt." Mr. Worth pursed his lips for a moment in thought, and then straightened his back decisively.

"At some point," he emphasized with his hands, "she is going to say — and this goes back to your first question, Harrison — at some point, usually the Morning After, but it could be anytime, so be on guard, she is going to say, 'You know? You seem *different* from the other guys.' Believe me, be ready for this one, because if you have any success at all, she's going to say it to you. And when she does, gentlemen, there is only one thing left for you to do. I mean, run. Do not pause; do not say good-bye; do not promise her flowers. The operative word here is *flee*. Get out. Scram. Do I make myself perfectly clear? It may take all the willpower you've got just to remember this advice, but if you don't remember it, you're done. Done, as in counting dependents on your income tax returns. Got that?" He regarded them with his sternest, most final kind of look. "All right, then, line up at the door for fingernail and shoeshine check, and then I don't want to see you guys again until nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Look sharp now, and good luck to all of you."

IT'S BEEN two days now, hasn't it, Mr. Worth?"

"Of course it's been two days, Stewart, you jerk. Don't you think I know that?" Mr. Worth suddenly slumped. "I'm sorry, Stewart. It's just been a strain, is all. I'm sorry."

"Do you think Harrison's going to make it back?"

"Stewart? Ah, never mind, Stewart. I guess you can't help it."

"Is he, Mr. Worth?"

"I don't think so. Stewart. If it were anyone but Harrison, I'd have already written the guy off by now, but with Harrison. . . . Well, I just hope the cocky little guy makes it back through the lines in one piece. If anybody can do it, it's one of those skinny guys like Harrison."

"Yeah," said Fredrickson. "Harrison was all right, you know? What do you think happened to him, Mr. Worth?"

"I wish I knew, Fredrickson. I've been over it in my mind a thousand times, and I just can't figure out how Harrison got it, even if it was his first time out. Hell, do you know what the odds are of buying the farm your first time out? About a zillion to one, is what. And for a guy like Harrison, who really knows his stuff? Five. Ten zillion to one. It just doesn't figure. I can't figure it out. I just keep thinking any minute now he's going to come walking through that door with three or four women on his arms and that big, easy grin of his from ear to ear, and ready for the party of his life. God, I miss that guy."

"You don't think he fell in love, do you Mr. Worth? I mean, really?"

"Like I said, Stewart, the odds are against it. Besides, there's no use resorting to some supernatural explanation when there's probably some ordinary reason for his being late. Hell, maybe his mother died or something. Maybe he got hit by a bus."

"So what do you think happened to him, Mr. Worth?"

"Stewart — dammit — just go back in your coma, will you? You're making me depressed."

Ms. Dorski paced nervously and lit a cigarette in class, which she had never done before. No one but Rothman would approach her.

"Uh, Ms. Dorski?"

"Be still, Rothman," said Ms. Dorski angrily. "Better yet, just go away."

"But where's Ms. Green, Ms. Dorski?"

"Thank you, Ms. Rothman, for cutting my heart in front of the class. You can be sure I won't forget it."

"But it wasn't your fault, Ms. Dorski!"

"Isn't it, Ms. Hammett?" Ms. Dorski raised her chin defiantly. "Unless I've missed something else, I'm still responsible here. Of course it's my fault. I just don't know how I'm going to live with myself, is all."

"Did you see what happened, Ms. Dorski? Was he a Killer-God?"

"Yes, I saw it all, Ms. Sutton, I'm very sorry to say; and no, he didn't look like any Killer-God to me. Heaven only knows, though, what he looked like to Green. You know how Green is."

"Well, I think it's just horrible," said Rothman to no one in particular. "I mean, what she did to Ms. Dorski, and everything."

"That's just enough from you, Ms. Rothman." Ms. Dorski's patience was really at an end. "Stop acting like such a cunt, will you?" Ms. Dorski knew she'd gone too far as the class erupted with a collective gasp, but what did Rothman really expect, anyway? Ms. Dorski was the only teacher who'd ever lost a pupil in Basic in the history of the Institute, and her career was probably over.

"Maybe it would help if you talked about it, Ms. Dorski. Like telling us how it happened, and like that."

"Maybe you're right, Ms. Hammett. I just don't know anymore. Maybe I'm getting too old for this job. My reflexes are too slow. I seem to be losing my touch." Now she was nearly in tears at the thought of it all.

"Oh, don't say *that*, Ms. Dorski. It was Green's fault she got caught, not yours."

"Rothman? You know, sometimes it makes me nervous just to think you're a woman. Oh, never mind, Rothman. Just forget it. Let's all sit down now, and I'll tell you what happened. At least the parts I can remember. It happened so fast I hardly saw it. It was so simple, who would have guessed?"

When everyone was comfortable, and the rustling of feet had stopped, Ms. Dorski took a deep final drag from her cigarette, threw it on the floor, and crushed it viciously with the toe of her shoe. Then she exhaled and leaned forward to the group, her eyes misted over with her memory of that strange, elusive scene.

"We were on Twelfth Street, where that new lingerie shop used to be before it closed . . . you know the one I mean? . . . and we were using the window to mirror the street . . . your basic reflection technique . . . when all of a sudden, out of the blue. . . ."

Harrison was cruising with fervor, when up ahead he saw her. She was no cinch, that's for sure, and the older woman she was with would make it a thousand times harder, but so what? Humming his *chanson de guerre*, he slowed for an Approach. He decided all at once (the great ones think this

way, he thought) to outflank the older woman, and finesse the girl on the spot.

Then, somehow, the girl had seen him. He felt sure of it, although she had never turned her head from the window — just the momentary sideways flash he'd heard so much about. And then, *mon Dieu*, what was that thing she did with her body? He had never known a body could move like that — like some slow dance in place, or a waterfall, or flower bending in the breeze. And to think she could do that whenever she wanted! He wanted her to do it again and again, but he could see she was already *en garde*.

He slowed as he came to her, and took a deep breath to settle his nerves. God, what was that perfume? Or was it perfume at all? Whatever it was, he knew he wanted to die in her arms, and be buried within that smell forever. Almost forgetting what he had set out to do, he brushed the older woman as he stopped next to her and leaned across in front of her to look at the girl, who had never taken her gaze from the window. It's now or never, he told himself.

The mother, or whatever she was, flinched from his touch and distractedly looked in his direction. Quickly, he leaned inside her glance and felt the whole thrilling power of his body leave his eyes to seek the girl's. She turned and caught his look full-face. And then she smiled at him. God, she smiled, and right into his eyes! This is it, he thought.

"Hi," he said. Just that.

"Hi," she answered back, and did that thing with her body again, as only she could do it.

"I just wanted to say," he began, and felt the trembling of his voice, "I know this is going to sound strange, but when I saw you here, I wondered, I mean, if you would like to come with me? And what's your name, and. . . ?" He stepped back from the window, and so did she, and they looked at each other with grins. He put out his hand, and she took it.

"My name is Heather Green," she said.

"That's a pretty name," he said, and tasted it with his heart. "But I guess everybody tells you that."

"Not really," she said with that move again. "But anyway, it sounds different the way you say it."

"Really?" he asked, with a pounding and flushing glow in his face. "Different how?"

What happens when a writer loses his soul? Mr. Resnick's short, sad tale has the answer . . .

Beibermann's Soul

By Mike Resnick

WHEN BEIBERMANN WOKE up on Wednesday morning, he discovered that his soul was missing.

"This can't be," he muttered to himself. "I know I had it with me when I went to bed last night."

He thoroughly searched his bedroom and his closet and his office, and even checked the kitchen (just in case he had left it there when he got up around midnight for a peanut butter sandwich), but it was nowhere to be found.

He questioned Mrs. Beibermann about it, but she was certain it had come back from the cleaner's the previous day.

"I'm sure it will turn up, wherever it is," she said cheerfully.

"But I need it *now*," he protested. "I am a literary artist, and what good is an artist without a soul?"

"I've always thought that some of the most successful writers we know had no souls," offered Mrs. Beibermann, thinking of a number of her husband's colleagues.

"Well, I need it," he said adamantly. "I mean, it's all very well to remove it when one is taking a shower or working in the garden, but I absolutely must have it before I can sit down to work."

So he continued searching for it. He went up to the attic and looked for it amid a lifetime's accumulation of memorabilia. He took his flashlight down to the basement and hunted through a thicket of broken chairs and sofas that he planned someday to give to the Salvation Army. Then, just to be on the safe side, he called the restaurant where he and his agent had eaten the previous evening to see if he had inadvertently left it there. But by midday he was forced to admit that it was indeed lost, or at the very least thoroughly misplaced.

"I can't wait any longer," he told his wife. "It's not as if I am a best-selling author. I have deadlines to meet and bills to pay. I must sit down to work."

"Shall I place a notice in the classified section of the paper?" she asked. "We could offer a reward."

"Yes," he said. "And report it to the police as well. They must stumble across lost and mislaid souls all the time." He walked to his office door, turned to his wife, and sighed dramatically. "In the meantime, I suppose I'll have to try to make do without it."

So he closed the office door, sat down, and began to work. Ideas (though not entirely his own) flowed freely, concepts (slightly tarnished but still workable) easily manifested themselves, characters (neatly labeled and ready to perform) popped up as he needed them. In fact, the ease with which he achieved his day's quota of neatly typed pages surprised him, although he had the distinct feeling that there was something *missing*, some element that could be supplied only by his misplaced soul.

Still, he decided, staring at what he had thus far accomplished, a lifetime's mastery of technique could hide a lot of faults. So he did a little of this, and a little of that, made a correction here, inserted some literary pyrotechnics there. He imbued it with a certain fashionable eroticism to impress his audience and a certain trendy obtuseness to bedazzle the critics, and finally he emerged and showed the finished product to his wife.

"I don't like it," said Mrs. Beibermann.

"I thought it was rather good," said Beibermann petulantly.

"It is rather good," she agreed. "But you never settled for rather good before."

Beibermann shrugged. "It's got a lot of style to it," he said. "Maybe no one else will see what's missing."

And indeed, no one else *did* see what was missing. His agent loved it, his public loved it, and most of all, his editor loved it. Beibermann deposited an enormous check in his bank account and went back to work.

"But what about your soul?" asked his wife.

"Oh, make sure the police are still looking for it, by all means," replied Beibermann. "But in the meantime, we must eat — and technique is not, after all, to be despised."

His next three projects brought higher advances and still more critical acclaim. By now he had also created a public *persona* — articulate, worldly, with just a hint of the sadness of one who had suffered too much for his Art — and while he still missed his soul, he had to admit that his new situation in the world was not at all unpleasant.

"We have enough money now," announced his wife one day. "Why don't we take a vacation? Surely your soul will be found by then — and even if it isn't, perhaps we can get you a new one. I understand they can make one up in three days in Hong Kong."

"Don't be silly," he said irritably. "My work is more popular than ever, I'm finally making good money, this is hardly the time for a vacation, and weren't you a lot thinner when I married you?"

He began sporting a goatee and a hairpiece after his next sale, and started working out in the neighborhood gymnasium, so that he wouldn't feel awkward and embarrassed when sweet young things accosted him for autographs at literary luncheons. He borrowed a number of surefire jokes and snappy comebacks and made the circuit of the television talk shows, and even began work on his autobiography, changing only those facts that seemed dull or mundane.

And then, on a cold winter's morning, a police detective knocked at his front door.

"Yes?" said Beibermann, puffing a Turkish cigarette through a golden holder, and eyeing him suspiciously.

The detective pulled out a worn, tattered soul and held it up.

"This just turned up in a pawnshop in Jersey," said the detective. "We have every reason to believe that it might be yours."

"Let me just step into the bathroom and try it on," said Beibermann, taking it from him.

Beibermann walked to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. Then he carefully unfolded the soul, smoothing it out here and there, and trying not to wince at its sorry condition. He did not try it on, however — it was quite dirty and shopworn, and there was no way to know who had been wearing it. Instead, he began examining it thoroughly, looking for telltale signs — a crease here, a worn spot there, most of them left over from his college days — and came to the inescapable conclusion that he was, indeed, holding his own soul.

For a moment his elation knew no bounds. Now, at last, he could go back to producing works of true Art.

Then he stared at himself in the mirror. He'd have to go back to living on a budget again, and of course there'd be no more spare time, for he was a meticulous craftsman when he toiled in the service of his art. Beibermann frowned. The innocent young things would seek someone else's autograph, the television hosts would flock to a new best-seller, and the only literary luncheons he would attend would be for some *other* author.

He continued staring at the New Improved Beibermann, admiring the well-trimmed goatee, the satin ascot, the tweed smoking jacket, the world-weary gaze from beneath half-lowered eyelids. Then, sighing deeply, he unlocked the door and walked back to the foyer.

"I'm sorry," he said as he handed the neatly folded soul back to the detective, "but this isn't mine."

"I apologize for taking up the valuable time of a world-famous man like yourself, sir," said the detective. "I could have sworn this was it."

Beibermann shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"Well, we'll keep plugging away, sir."

"By all means, officer," said Beibermann. He lowered his voice confidentially. "I trust that you'll be very discreet, though; it wouldn't do for certain critics to discover that my soul was missing." He passed a fifty-dollar bill to the detective.

"I quite understand, sir," said the detective, grabbing the bill and stuffing it into a pocket of his trenchcoat. "You can depend on me."

Beibermann smiled a winning smile. "I knew I could, officer."

Then he returned to his office and went back to work.

He had been dead and buried for seven years before anyone suggested that his work lacked some intangible factor. A few revisionist critics

agreed, but nobody could pinpoint what was missing.

Mrs. Beibermann could have told them, of course — but she had taken an around-the-world cruise when Beibermann left her for the second of his seven wives, met and married a banker who was far too busy to discuss Art, and spent the rest of her life raising orchids, avoiding writers, and redecorating her house.



"Say cheese, Sire."



FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 30: *In Which the Li'l White Lies Thesis (Part Two) Takes Us By the Snout and Drags Us Unwillingly Toward a Door We Fear to Open*

WE WERE talking about being lied to, and how it unhinges us. How it makes us feel used and foolish, that we were so damned *anxious* to believe the hype. How irrationally *angry* it makes us to know that no matter how wise and experienced we have become as we grew older, that adroit liars can still manipulate us by plumbing our ever-regenerating gullibility, our *need* to believe. (In this way, I suspect, no amount of revelation of corruption on the part of televangelists will ever free their supporters. They discover one awfulness after another about the Falwells, Swaggarts, Popoffs, Robertsons and

Bakkers, and yet they fling themselves again and again into the wash of hosannahs that keeps them asea in ignorance.)

As Michel de Montaigne, the French moralist, wrote: "Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know."

We were talking about the false lures thrown out by the makers of movies to convince us that trash has sidebar merit, value apart from the work itself. And I mentioned that we had been lied to as regards, among other films, the 1985 fantasy *Ladyhawke*. And one of you wrote insisting that I was wrong, that the film was based on some obscure medieval legends. And Faithful Reader upbraided me for mischievously shattering beliefs.

Well, I never went into detail on that matter, because I'm trying (in what now appears to be a series of three columns) to codify a thesis of gullibility and duplicity that *seems*

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to have some credibility; and I simply didn't have the time to linger. But perhaps you do need a bit more convincing.

In the September/October 1987 issue of *Scannings*, an information search and retrieval newsletter for librarians, we find the following Q&A exchange:

Q: On what legends was the movie "Ladyhawke" based? The story concerns lovers who are cursed. He is a wolf at night, she a hawk by day. They assume their human forms only at opposite times.

A: The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library had a press release from Warner Bros. stating, "Legend dates back to the 13th century from paintings on the walls of the Mauseturm Castle in the Rhine Valley to the Loup Garou legend of France's Auvergne Forest to Rodriguez de la Fuente in Spain."

When we went to gather these legends . . . we found the Mauseturm story did not match, the loup-garou, or werewolf, story was too vague, and the only Rodriguez de la Fuente we found was a 20th century Spanish naturalist.

We wrote to scriptwriter Edward Khmara for an explanation. Here is his reply:

The story of two lovers kept apart by taking human form only at opposite times of the day was an

inspiration that occurred to me while jogging on the roof of the Hollywood YMCA.

The studio contention that "Ladyhawke" was based on an old legend is, in fact, a violation of Writers Guild rules, since it denies me full rights to authorship. The Guild undertook an action against Warner Bros. on this account . . . and a small amount of money was paid as compensation . . . Warner Bros., or its publicity department, continues to circulate material restating the old legend story.

The inspiration for the character of Phillipe the Mouse was Francois Villon. His "Testament" recounts his imprisonment and mis-treatment by Bishop Thibault d'Aussigny, in the dungeons of Meung. When the Dauphin, soon to be Louis XI of France, passed through Meung on the way to his coronation, he freed the prisoners, including Villon. This incident was actually used in the original story of "Ladyhawke."

So I may have been wrong about the meaning of "liver and lights," but I definitely knew what I was talking about when I used *Ladyhawke* as an example of how we are lied to.

Lied to, that is, in the specific sense of misrepresentation. And here, as I promised in Installment 29, we'll move on to another kind

of lying, another species of misrepresentation: plagiarism.

If one elects to pursue a plagiarism suit in a court of law, one must *never* solicit "expert testimony" from a Renaissance or Medieval scholar, because stealing the work, ideas, manner of others, in those times, was considered nothing unusual. In fact, quite acceptable.

The modern concept of plagiarism, paradoxically, is both specific and nebulous. What is theft, and what is "coincidental simultaneous generation" of idea or ambience? What is the rapacity of producers, network development executives, main chance hustlers and all those who denigrate writers but don't know how to construct a plot themselves . . . and what is acceptable, even flattering, literary crossover, feedback, input, stimulation?

In the world of publishing, plagiarism is so rare that its occurrence startles everyone, and it makes the news section of *Publishers Weekly*.

(Oddly enough — given the almost encyclopedic memories of so many readers and writers and fans, guaranteeing near-instantaneous unmasking — there have been a few notable instances of book/story plagiarism in the sf/fantasy genre in recent memory. There was a guy who took Gardner F. Fox's 1964 Paperback Library novel, *Escape Across the Cosmos*, changed the

names of the characters, and sold it to another paperback house some years later. There is considerable mythology surrounding that most flagrant case, and while I'm certain some readers will know the specifics, the best I can do is present *all* the data I can dredge up from imperfect memories, both actual and emblematic. Trying to get the anecdote accurately, I savaged the recollections of Charlie Brown of *Locus*, Silverberg, Joe Haldeman and several others, but understandably enough, none of these rational gentlemen cared to depart from their creative labors to spend several hours rummaging through ancient issues of the *SFWA Forum* or other sources to get me the data. You've got to *be kidding* and *Piss off, kid* were the politest responses. Can't say I blame 'em; so you'll have to do with this jumble of truths and fancies intended to make the point, not to reflect what actually happened. Anyhow, one story has it that a customer came into a specialty bookshop bearing a copy of a paperback bought the day before, screaming scorched earth at the bookseller for having sold the outraged reader a novel that was *exactly* like one the customer had read. When the bookseller compared the new title with the Fox book, it was discovered that the theft was line-for-line. The author had copied the entire novel

merely changing the names of the characters. When the bookseller advised the publisher — some say it was Belmont, a well-known schlock operation, thus making this a classic case of poetic justice — the publisher sought out the writer and discovered he was hard at work doing the same job on an old Robert Moore Williams Ace double. When confronted with his crime, the guy is alleged to have been utterly bewildered. "I didn't do anything wrong," he's reported to have said. "Isn't this the way all books are written?" If that part isn't whole cloth, then it was a case of doltish behavior raised to the *n*th power. But other versions of the yarn have it that the guy also sold the Fox novel a second time, to the hard-cover publisher Thomas Nelson, having changed the names again. And when they went looking for the clown, he'd cashed the check and split. Either way, it doesn't speak well to the familiarity-with-genre of the editors involved. Usually, this kind of thing is the result of uncomplicated amateurism, a lack of commonsense, *naïveté* almost impossible to conceive if one has even a passing familiarity with writing and publishing. Impossible for us to believe, yet far more common than one might suspect. But once in a while the plagiarism comes from a professional who *does* know better,

who does the deed fully cognizant of what s/he is pulling off. In 1974 a well-known fantasy author — whose identity, though known to me, has never been publicly revealed, nor will I do so now — masquerading as "Terry Dixon," supposedly a young black male writer, copped the famous Anatole France short story, "The Procurator of Judaea," rewrote it as "The Prophet of Zorayne," and passed it off for sale to Roger Elwood for a Trident Press/Pocket Books anthology. A private detective named Sam Bluth was hired to track down the culprit, and the writer — neither young nor black — was brought to book. A rare, bizarre case.)

But if the foregoing produce hilo because of their rarity, not even a hiccup is produced by the *daily* thefts in the world of television and motion pictures. It is so common, this thuggish misappropriation of other's stories — both produced and in raw manuscript form — that when Ben Bova and I won our plagiarism suit against ABC-TV and Paramount in 1980, both the media and industry were astonished that someone had actually pursued such a pilferage beyond the *pro forma* out-of-court, keep-your-mouth-shut, take-the-money-and-scamper cash settlement (*Sci-fi writers win \$337,000 in plagiarism suit!* said the front page of the Los Angeles

Herald-Examiner with a word-choice that made my toenails ache].

It is no less than institutionalized behavior, no more needful of exculpation, in the larcenous souls of these dandiprats, than is the gnawing of long pig off a femur in the view of a cannibal. How to explain it . . . in terms a rational, ethical human being can comprehend . . .

Perhaps this:

I have written the anecdote elsewhere, but I cannot remember just where. Don't stop me if you've heard this before, I'm on a roll.

Two hundred thousand years ago, when I was youngish in the movie business, I was called in to the offices of a producer who had been on the Paramount lot forever. He made B films. Still does. Saw him on *Entertainment Tonight* just a few weeks ago. Must be older than Angkor Wat. You'd recognize the name. Anyway. He sat me down, and he ran the *de rigueur* chat, and then he puffed up and spread his petals like the *Rafflesia microbilorum** and he told

*A stemless, leafless, parasitic plant of the genus *Rafflesia*, named after Sir T. Stamford Raffles, British East Indian administrator and founder (1819) of Singapore, in honor of his discovery of this plant order. The microbilorium is the largest-known rafflesiaceous plant of the genus, weighing 37 lbs. and a yard wide. Indigenous to the Malay Peninsula, it was first identified in central Sumatra by naturalist Arnold Newman, who reports that it takes the bud three years to develop, then it springs open in an instant with the hiss of a striking cobra. Open, it smells like rotten meat.

me he had the most sensational idea for a science fiction monster movie since Santa Claus conquered the Martians, and he wanted widdle ole me to write it. There was one of these at the end of his pitch: !

"Delight me," I said, all aglow at the prospect of hearing a basic concept so effulgent in its fecundity that it would knock me ass over teakettle. And he grinned hugely, and he said:

"Ta hell with all the giant ant movies, and the giant spider movies, and the giant leech movies! I already have the studio backing to produce the first giant locust movie!"

We then began, in those pre-Maddie & David days, to do *Moonlighting* stichomythia:

"No," I said.

"No?" he said.

"No."

"What, no?"

"No, not possible."

"What, not possible?"

"Me writing such a dumb."

"It's dumb?"

"It is cataclysmically dumb."

"Why, dumb?"

"Look," I said, speaking slowly and making sure he was watching my lips, "there is this absolutely ironclad, irrevocable, no way to get around, under, over or through it rule in physics. It is called . . ." and I cut in the echo chamber effect to make sure he knew this was Big

Stuff, "... THE SQUARE CUBE LAWahwahwahwah..."

"Square Cube Law." He repeated it. Then again.

"That's right. The Square Cube Law. And you know what the Square Cube Law of physics, that is *the law of the universe*, says?"

"What does it say?"

"It says that if you increase the size by squaring it, you *cube* the weight. Now. Do you know what that means in practical terms?"

"No, I don't know what that means."

"It means that if, say, you take the largest ant known, which is maybe a quarter of an inch long, and you blow it up a thousand times, which would make it something over twenty feet high... would that be a big enough ant for you...?"

"Locust."

"Okay! Locust, fer chrissakes! Pretend the goddamn locust is a quarter inch long and you make it a thousand times bigger. Is that a big enough locust for you?"

"Could it be sixty feet?"

"Please! Settle for twenty, just for the sake of discussion."

"Okay, for this talk, twenty. But if we're gonna have a special effect that looks terrific on the screen, it really should be at *least* sixt—" He could see my eyes were rolling and little bits of foam were flecking the

corners of my mouth, so he hastily placated me. "Twenty is okay. Twenty is good."

"Right. So now we have a twenty foot high locust. We have increased the size by a thousand times. But the Square Cube Law says the *weight* isn't merely squared, it's cubed... that means three times three times three... okay?"

"If you say so."

"I say so. The fuckin' Law says so! Which means the weight has been increased not a thousand times, but a *million* times. And since the ant or the locust or the katydid or whateverthehell it is, is only made out of balsa wood and crepe paper and held together by flour-and-water paste or maybe the bug world equivalent of Elmer's Glue, the whole damned thing won't be able to support its own weight, and it will come crashing down like the second week's receipts on a Jerry Lewis movie. Got it?"

"Uh."

"Okay. Let me quote to you from a great scientist, scholar, philosopher and very wealthy man (I threw in that last to get his attention) named L. Sprague De Camp. He said, simply, 'Every time you double the insect's dimensions, you increase its strength and the area of its breathing passages by four, but you multiply its mass by eight, so you can't enlarge him much before

he can no longer move or breathe.'"

"Ooooooh."

"Yeah. Oh. So you see, it's a dumb idea that won't work, even though a lot of dumb movies have been made that way, which was okay when people were stupid and believed the Earth was flat and you could sail over the edge, but not today when every kid wants to be an astronaut."

So he thought about that for a few minutes, in silence. And then he brightened. He said, "So okay, I take your point. That's why I called you in. You're smart about this kind of stuff." (Little did he know I had to call Silverberg to get him to explain the damned Square Cube Law to me.) "So if you don't like *that* idea, take any one of those up there. . . ." And he pointed to a chifforobe in the corner, atop which sat, mildewing under a patina of dust and silverfish droppings, a stack of old Ziff-Davis pulp magazines. *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Giant Insect Tales*. "Go through 'em. Take any idea you like. We'll make that one!"

"Are you crazy?"

"What, crazy?"

"That's *stealing*! It's plagiarism!"

"Who'll know?"

"I'll know, you asshole!"

"I don't have to listen to that kinda talk!"

"You're right," I said, rising. "You

don't." And I left.

To this day, he doesn't realize he was suggesting something disreputable beyond the telling.

And *that* is the attitude that prevails in Hollywood. Now do you understand?

There is, in these people, the imbrication of arrogance and stupidity that is as impenetrable to ethic as an armadillo's hide. If they chance upon a concept that manages to penetrate, and they can identify it with some film already made that did big box-office, and if it is not so different that when they pitch it, the similarity to the successful former film escapes the studio boss or the network honcho, they will offer it as their own. That it came from some other creative source does not enter into their thinking. *We'll change it, it'll work*, they say. And those to whom they are pitching are equally as ignorant of sources, so they enter unwittingly into the conspiracy to steal.

Which may or may not be what happened with *The Running Man* and *The Hidden*. But though we've drawn nearer to that door behind which lies a horror unspeakable, we will all have to wait till installment 31 for the conclusion of the thesis of Li'l White Lies. Which may not be a goddam LAW OF THE UNIVERSE but if it ain't, it oughtta be!

I complained years ago that I'd never seen an SF story about basketball. Still hadn't, until Vance Aandahl, who admits to being a moderately good basketball player in his day, sent this short and funny tale about the new center for an NBA expansion team, the Vancouver Maneaters . . .

Natural Talent

By Vance Aandahl

THE BAN?
Sure, I remember the ban. Hell, I oughta remember. I was there. I can tell ya what happened a lot more accurately than any of these so-called sports historians.

This was back in the previous century, ya understand. The 1998-99 season. The Sacramento Kings were building a dynasty. They'd won the NBA championship twice in a row, and this year they looked even better. They were off to a 22-1 start, 23-1, something like that. They weren't just winning; they were blowing teams like the Celtics and the Lakers right off the court. The Kings had a front line that must have averaged seven-three, seven-four. That was unusual in those days, back before height drugs.

Anyway, their forwards were a couple of beanpoles, but the one I wanta tell ya about was their center, Buster Bardwick. At seven-seven, Buster was the tallest player in the league. And believe me, Buster was no beanpole. He weighed well over three hundred, and carried the majority of it in

his shoulders and chest. Buster wasn't just big and strong; he was mean, too. He muscled everybody around. He'd developed a reputation for being the dirtiest player in the whole league. Since he was also just about the best, the refs let him get away with it.

That year I was the fifth guard with the Vancouver Maneaters. In mid-December we played the Kings on our own court, and they skunked us. Buster scored a bunch of points and pulled down a bunch of rebounds and blocked a bunch of shots. He also beat the crap out of our whole front line. He kept throwing elbows and shoving guys in the back and stomping on their toes — nothing but cheap shots all night long. He knocked our pivot-man Danny Ritchen flat on his ass, breaking his tailbone in the process, and believe it or not, the zeeb blew the whistle on Danny instead of Buster.

What's that? You don't know what a zeeb was? That's short for zebra. We called the referees zeebs 'cause they wore black-and white-striped uniforms, just like those animals that used to live in Africa. Ya gotta understand — this was back in the old days before players were cyber-trained not to foul. Back before floor sensors.

Anyway, we wound up losing by close to fifty points. Nothing unusual. Vancouver was a brand-new franchise. Our team had been put together in a dispersal draft. Maybe our name was the Maneaters, but we were getting eaten alive by every other team in the league. I think we had about as many wins as the Kings had losses.

The next night we had to play the Kings again — a rematch down in Sacramento on their home court in the Sub. We knew we were gonna get our butts kicked. We all drooped our way through practice, heads down, no zip. Then Coach Bird calls us together and says just relax, cool off for a minute — he's gonna introduce us to our new teammate, the guy who's gonna fill up the roster now that Ritchen's on injured reserve.

So we're standing around letting the sweat dry, feeling depressed, not talking much, when Coach Bird comes back on the court with the biggest guy I've ever seen.

Big. Big with a capital B. Big as in humongous.

This guy *loomed* over the rest of us. That's the only word for it. He wasn't just tall; he was broad, too. Later I found out he stood nine foot two and weighed 712, but at the time I wasn't worrying about stats — I was just looking up and thinking, holy moly, this dude could eat Tokyo.

"All right, fellas," goes Coach Bird. "I wantcha to meet Sassy. Sassy is

So we played Sassy and Maurice ten on two, and damned if they didn't beat us.

deaf and dumb. He only learned how to play the game a couple of weeks ago. But he has a lot of natural talent."

Sassy took a step forward and opened his mouth in a big, dumb grin. His arms hung at his sides. He had a weird reddish brown flattop haircut. His skin was so white it looked unnatural, like it'd never been exposed to the sun.

"O.K. now," goes Coach Bird. "I want the rest of you bofos to play against Sassy and Maurice. All of you at once. Ten on two."

"Ten on two?" goes Maurice Pearl, our scoring guard. "You're putting us on."

"Just do it," goes Coach Bird. He gives us that funny, puckered-up little smile of his. "Just do it."

So we played Sassy and Maurice ten on two, and damned if they didn't beat us. Besides being enormous, Sassy was quicker than anybody else. He could dribble the ball like a point guard, and he had a silky-soft touch on his shot. His leaping ability made him absolutely phenomenal on defense. Toward the end we got frustrated and started gang-bumping him pretty hard in an attempt to set screens for our shooters, but somehow he always managed to finesse his way around us and swat down the shot.

After the scrimmage we just stood there staring at the floor. Maurice had a weird grin on his face, but he didn't look very sure of himself. All he'd done is throw the ball in.

Coach Bird came out and delivered a little speech welcoming Sassy to the team. Sassy stood there hulking over Coach Bird with a blank, peaceful look in his eyes. I couldn't believe how colorless his skin was. When Coach Bird asked him to say hi to us, he went *yeep yeep yeep* in this whistly, high-pitched voice. We knew he was deaf and dumb, so nobody made any wise remarks. We just gave him some low fives and medium fives (he was too tall for high fives), and we didn't worry about the yeeps.

What we were worrying about was what Sassy would do to that asshole Buster Bardwick when we played the Kings. Hoo boy. Did I say worrying? Drooling at the prospect is more like it. Were we ever.

So the next day we fly down to Sacramento. The Kings played in a

brand-new facility called the Sub, the nation's first deep underground arena. They had a full-color holo instead of a scoreboard, and a flexiplast floor that bounced like a trampoline when a player went down, but stayed hard the rest of the time. A few years later they put in the league's first fully computerized officiating system.

What's that? Yeah, you're right. They filled up the Sub with nuclear waste back in the 2030s. But this was long before that. Ya gotta remember, I'm talkin' about the old days.

Anyway, while the rest of the Kings were shooting lay-ups, Buster Bardwick warmed up by running around the edge of the court, waving his amrs at the crowd — trying to work them into a frenzy. They hooted and hollered and whistled and stomped. A lot of them had jackhorns and vibers, so the noise was deafening. And the projectionist kept skywriting slogans over the court with the holo: "Kings Rule" and "Masticate the Maneaters" and the like.

That Coach Bird — he was a wily sonofabitch. He didn't bring Sassy out on the floor during our pregame practice. The rest of us loafed through our drills like a bunch of broken-down old hound dogs. But that was just an act. Inside, our hearts were pounding.

Just before tip-off, Coach Bird led Sassy out of the locker room and pointed him toward the center circle. Sassy flashed that sheepish, dumb-ass grin of his and sashayed right on out there.

Let me tell ya — I've seen a lot of crowds, but I've never seen one react like this one did. They're looking at a ballplayer who's a foot and a half taller than their hotshot center. Broader, too. First they got quiet. Real quiet. Then they all started talking. It didn't sound like your normal crowd noise — more like a zillion broken vidscreens all buzzing at once.

What's that?

Sure, sure, I'll get to the point. Sheesh — I just wanta create a little atmosphere for ya, let ya know what it felt like to be there. Anyway, the game started, and right away ya could see it was no contest. Sassy dominated. On offense he popped a few medium-range jumpers, slam-dunked a few close ones, but he also played great team ball, setting picks, moving in and out, hitting the open man with these crisp blindside passes. And on defense? Let me tell ya, it seemed like Sassy rejected every shot the Kings took.

At the end of the first quarter, we led 31 to 7. The Kings couldn't be-

lieve it. Buster Bardwick was grinding the enamel off his back molars.

Poor Buster. He'd been shut out cold. No points. No assists. No rebounds. No steals. No blocked shots. No nothing.

But what could he do? He was playing against an opponent who was quicker than he was and stood damn near tall as the rim itself.

Buster wasn't thinking in a rational fashion. He felt totally humiliated. He took it personally. When the second quarter started, he came out exercising his jaw muscles and glaring up at Sassy with sulfuric acid in his eyes.

The Kings brought the ball upcourt. Sassy stationed himself in front of the basket, hands held high, guarding the rim. He was grinning like a goof. From the bench I had a real good view. He looked so damn big it made my head swim, but I was also struck by that pale white complexion of his. Finally it dawned on me why Sassy's skin was so unnaturally pallid. His body had been shaved. Up until a day or two ago, all that skin had been covered with a thick coat of hair, what you might call a pelt, probably the same reddish brown color as his flattop.

I was starting to catch on, but I still hadn't figured out that Sassy's name was short for Sasquatch.

Just then Buster came across the lane and elbowed Sassy in the stomach. The zeebs didn't bat a lash. They were busy watching the Kings' point guard dribble the ball aimlessly around at the top of the key.

Now, Buster always knew when the zeebs were looking the other way. He was a genius at picking the right time to deliver a cheap shot. When Maurice Pearl stole the ball from the Kings' point guard and blazed upcourt, the zeebs' eyes went with Maurice. Buster was free to do whatever he wanted. He stood in front of Sassy and punched him in the gut as hard as he could.

Sassy whooshed and bent over a little at the waist. Then his eyes got big as poker chips. He grabbed Buster around the neck and lifted him up off the floor. What happened next was pretty awful. I'll tell ya one thing — it sure shut down that noisy Sacramento crowd. No one even noticed whether Maurice Pearl scored or not. They all just sat there watching Sassy and Buster. In horrified silence.

That place got so quiet I could *hear* what Sassy was doing to Buster, even though I was sitting forty feet away on the bench. It was a soft, crunching noise, kind of slow and thoughtful, like maybe Sassy was thinking hard while he chewed.

"Oh shit," goes Coach Bird. I guess he knew he'd never coach again.

I heard this low moan rise up from the crowd. The guy sitting next to me on the bench turned white in the face and started panting like a dog with the dry heaves.

Hell, the front office had no choice. The league can't be taking risks like that. They had to ban Bigfoots after what Sassy did to Buster Bardwick.



"How do I know that that time contraption of yours really works, Harry, and that you've just whizzed back from 3087 A.D.?"

Continuing the adventures of the minstrel Alaric, who has taken up a dangerous new life in the north. Phyllis Eisenstein's new book, THE CRYSTAL PALACE, will be published shortly by New American Library.

BEYOND THE RED LORD'S REACH

By Phyllis Eisenstein

SYNOPSIS OF PART 1

Alaric the minstrel, whose witch's power enables him to travel beyond the horizon in an instant, has run from a nightmare. Behind him lies the valley of the grim Red Lord, a man who finds his pleasure in torturing innocent people to death. Alaric could have killed him, and freed the valley folk from that tyranny, but he was afraid of being killed himself in the act. Now he flees both the man and his own fear, flees northward across a vast rolling plain of grass.

He joins a band of deer-hunting nomads, and at the great gathering of their people, at the calving grounds, he does not lack for food and bright fires and laughter. The nomads' high chief Simir is so taken with Alaric's songs that he invites the minstrel to join his own band, to share their substance and their journey. Liking Simir immediately, and having no better place to go, Alaric accepts.

Always before, Alaric has been a wanderer, passing through his listeners' lives as through a landscape. Now he finds himself deeply entangled in the lives of the nomads, for good and for ill. Zavia, a beautiful and willful young woman, becomes his lover, and the youths who formerly shared her among them — Simir's three sons — become his enemies. When Alaric reveals, in song, that he visited the Red Lord's valley and knows of its horrors, the eldest son even accuses him of being the Red Lord's spy. Zavia leaps to his defense, but there is no need, for the high chief himself sees the truth; touched by the poignancy of the song, Simir understands that no one could sing with such heartfelt sadness and be the Red Lord's man. He tells Alaric what the other nomads already know — that he was once the Red Lord's man, but he left the valley after his own wife was tortured to death. And he is not the only one among the nomads who has lost a loved one to the Red Lord. From time to time, nomad youths have gone to the valley seeking medicinal herbs, and few of them have ever returned. Alaric was lucky, the nomads say, and only he knows that there was no luck involved, not for a minstrel with a witch's power.

Briefly, Alaric lives an idyll with Zavia. But soon, Simir's sons decide they will

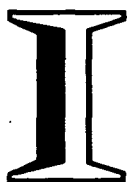
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tolerate him no more, and they challenge him to fight any one of them. Alaric resists their goading, and so, in the middle of the night, they burst into Zavia's tent, knives seeking him. Thanks to his witch's power, Alaric escapes in the darkness and confusion, then — to keep his power secret — pretends he was not in the tent when they entered. To punish them for their attack, Simir beats his sons, even though they are nearly grown men.

Zavia does not believe Alaric's version of the disturbance; she thinks he used magic to escape the three youths. And she is no stranger to magic, for she is the daughter of Kata, the witch of the northern people. When she cannot coax Alaric into admitting what really happened, she tells her mother the tale, and Kata calls Alaric to her tent to determine the truth. There she drugs, hypnotizes, and seduces him, and when she has done so, she knows everything about him. And she claims him, in some strange, mystical fashion that he can feel in his bones but not understand. The experience frightens him, makes him want to run from her, and suddenly his passion for Zavia and his friendship for Simir no longer seem so strong as they once were, now that they must be balanced against his fear of Kata.

Late that night, Alaric tries to talk to Simir about that fear. But he has scarcely begun, when the two of them are attacked by three men. In the ensuing melee, with the darkness his ally, Alaric uses his special power to bedevil the attackers and help Simir beat them to the ground. A torch reveals that the three men are Simir's sons. Cold with anger, Simir sentences the younger ones to banishment, and the eldest, the ringleader, to be taken to the Red Lord's valley, tied to a tree, and left for the tyrant's pleasure. Then he asks Alaric to be his son in their stead.

Kata brings a cup of the Elixir of Life, which the nomads drink when they reach adulthood, and offers it to Alaric to seal the adoption. And at that moment he realizes that his new life in the north, and his feelings for its people, are far stronger than his fear of her. He drinks, and decides to stay.



I MUST DO THIS myself," said Simir. He was lashing a small pack to the back of his riding deer. The men who would go south with him were waiting, a hard and unforgiving escort for the three trussed and silent youths.

"But you are the high chief," Alaric said. "The people need you."

Simir shook his head. "They know the way north without me."

"But it's dangerous." He gripped Simir's thick arm, as if to hold him back. "What will we do if something happens to you?"

The high chief clapped Alaric's hand with his own and then slid away from it, mounting the deer with the grace of a man half his size. From his

new height, he gave Alaric a grim smile. "We," he said, and he reached down to tousle the minstrel's dark hair. "It's good to hear you say that. My son."

"Simir," Alaric said. "Let me go with you. I'll beguile your evenings with song. The journey won't seem so long that way."

The high chief shook his head. "We ride hard and fast, lad. We'll have no time for music. Besides, how do you think Zavia would feel if I took you away from her?"

Alaric glanced over his shoulder; she was some distance off, standing with a few other women at the nearest fire, but watching him, and smiling. The thought of leaving her made his heart ache, but the thought of letting Simir enter the Red Lord's valley with only these few followers made it race with foreboding.

"I could be useful. . .," he began.

Simir silenced him with a raised hand. "If you would please me, go north with my people. Beguile *their* evenings with song."

Alaric sighed. *Does he know?* Events had moved so fast, there had been no moment to take him aside and discover, by indirection, if he knew Alaric's secret. And no moment to ask Kata, either, if she had revealed it. *Shall I follow, in case he needs me?*

"Don't worry so hard, lad," Simir said. "We know what we're about." And with that, he turned his mount toward the south and led his little caravan out of camp.

Alaric walked half a hundred paces after them, past the last cluster of tents, the last picketed animals. Hard and fast they rode indeed, and none of them looked back . . . none but Gilo. Bound up tight, stiff and straight on his deer, he turned his head to cast a final glance at the stranger who was his downfall. A hate-filled and defiant glare it was, and it made Alaric shudder.

"Don't go."

The voice at Alaric's elbow made him start. It was Kata.

"You must not help him, minstrel," she said. "You, of all people, must let him do this in his own fashion."

It came home to Alaric that she was speaking of the high chief. "This is my fault," he said. "I owe him help."

"You don't understand, my Alaric. This has been coming for a long time. You were merely the excuse. The boys were spoiled and insolent. Gilo would never have been high chief, nor the others, not unless time had changed them out of all recognition. But time rarely does such things; we

are what we are, from an early age." She caught hold of Alaric's chin with one hand and forced him to look at her. "You, for example, my Alaric — you are a coward. You will never be more, no matter that you sprang to Simir's aid last night, no matter that you want to go with him now. Your first thought always is to run. You even fight by running, by dodging, never by standing your ground."

Alaric met her cold gaze steadily. "I won't deny I'm a coward, Lady. But we are what we are, as you say, and we must all make the best of it."

"You will never be high chief."

Startled, he pulled away from her. "I? High chief?"

"He wants it. Don't you know, minstrel? He sees wisdom in your songs."

"Not my wisdom. Not most of it."

"He sees . . . you in twenty years, ready to take his place."

"Surely one of your own people would be the proper choice. . . ."

"He was not of our people, once."

Alaric looked toward the southern horizon. The riders were mere dots now, against the pale green of the plain. "Is that why he adopted me? For this dream of a son as high chief?"

"That was part of it."

Alaric shook his head. "He's blinded by grief now, Lady. But he'll see me clearly when a little time has passed." He turned back to her. "Have you told him about me?"

"He knows."

They stood together for a time after that, silent, each gazing southward, till there was nothing left to see but the rolling plain. At last she said, "You will not follow, will you?"

Alaric sighed. "No."

"I did not think you would."

He doesn't want me along, Alaric thought. But he could not help wondering, in some small corner of his mind, if his real reason was not that, with time to think about the venture, fear had begun to creep upon him. In the valley of the Red Lord, even a man with a witch's power could die.

Behind him, he could hear the nomads striking their tents. It was time to resume the long trek home.

With Simir gone, a restlessness seemed to possess the band. The children played harder; the hunters ranged farther; the herders used their switches of

woven grass more often. By unspoken consensus, men who had paired off for mock combat occasionally, or for archery competition, now fell to those activities with a will, as if preparing for some invasion. It was good to keep one's skills honed, they would say when Alaric wondered at their zeal. And after saying so, they would look to the south, where only grass was visible to the horizon. Eventually, he joined them, novice though he was. For he, too, was restless, and all his songs, and all of Zavia's sweet distraction, could not prevent him from turning to the south half a dozen times a day.

At last, one morning when the nomad camp lay silent in sleep, Alaric's restlessness overcame him. He could guess how far each day's hard ride would take Simir's company, and he thought they must be near that terrible valley by now. Softly, he crept from Zavia's tent and stole away through the tall grass. When he was a hundred paces from the camp, he vanished.

He appeared on a slope high above the valley. He did not know what route Simir had planned through the mountains, but he was sure the high chief's goal must be a place visible to the goatherds that visited these heights. He made a sweep of the likeliest-looking approaches, flitting from tree to boulder to tree, but he saw no token of man or deer.

He returned to a spot nearly a mile from camp, and he walked the rest of the way in, as an ordinary person would. Zavia was waking by then, and he told her that he had been answering a call of nature.

On his fourth morning journey, he found what he was seeking.

He saw nothing of Simir and his bleak-eyed men; he supposed they had arrived by night and gone away when their work was done. But true to Simir's word, they had left Gilo tied fast to a tree, in full view of the valley.

It was a lightning-blasted stump, thick and gray and broken off jaggedly two man-heights above the ground, like a clutching fist half-buried in the earth. Gilo stood against it, his head back, his eyes staring. On his face, hatred mingled with fear in an expression that was at once ugly and pathetic. The brightening dawn showed smears of blood around the rawhide binding his arms, signs of the struggle he had given over.

Hidden by thick brush, Alaric watched him — watched his eyes that looked straight at the Red Lord's castle, watched his lips that, from time to time, whispered curses. There was agony in those eyes and on those lips; Gilo's torment had begun already, before the Red Lord could touch him. And despite everything, Alaric felt a stab of pity for him.

He heard the sound of footsteps then — hard boots crunching on loose

pebbles. Some distance down the hillside, a dozen of the Red Lord's men were climbing toward the blasted tree.

There was time, Alaric knew, for him to reach Gilo and carry him away, to deliver him to a new life in the south, far from his father, and safe from the Red Lord's appetites. A new life, another chance, all in the space of a heartbeat. Several heartbeats passed, along with the steady crunch of gravel.

He jumped then, but only to the cover of a more distant thicket. *A terrible punishment, Simir, he thought, but it is not for me to counter your judgment.*

The soldiers approached the tree warily, their swords drawn. Soon, though, they realized that Gilo was no bait for an ambush, only a sacrifice, and they slashed his bonds and marched him down the slope. Surrounded by the heralds of his future, Gilo walked stiff-legged, but with his head held high.

Alaric looked away at last, a shudder coursing through him. And then he was in the north once more, and in the distance lay the nomad camp, bustling with morning activity. He ran toward the tents, and the people, as fast as his legs could carry him.

He made no more southward journeys. But that did not keep him from looking in that direction.

"Too soon, too soon," a woman would say to him, though she would be scanning the southern horizon herself. "Too soon." And then, late one afternoon, when the cookfires were blazing and the scent of stewing game seemed to envelop the whole camp, it was no longer too soon.

Word passed like a stormwind through the camp. Like a song, the name leaped from mouth to mouth: Simir, Simir! Only later, when someone thought to count the approaching figures, did the high chief's people realize that more deer than had gone south were returning, and every one bore a rider.

The nomads streamed out to welcome their leader, and they scarcely let him dismount before they mobbed him, crying out his name, grasping at him as if they needed the touch of his flesh to be sure he was real. He pressed hands all among the crowd, bellowing greetings in every direction. But Alaric's was the hand he clasped most firmly.

"You did stay," he said, his voice barely audible in the tumult.

"I said I would," Alaric replied.

Behind Simir, still mounted after the high chief's comrades had joined the crowd, were nine strangers. Seven men and two women, they glanced about nervously, eyes ever returning to one another, seeking reassurance. Alaric recognized them.

They did not look as they had when last he had seen them. Gone were the tatters that had passed as their clothing. Instead, they wore nomad garments, and good boots on their feet. And they sat their steeds with confidence, they who had once scrambled barefoot and starving in the mountains. Their hair betrayed them, though; blond as Simir's own, it marked them as born in the Red Lord's valley.

Simir raised an arm for silence, and when his people had hushed, he gestured broadly toward the strangers. "These are exiles from the Red Lord's land," he said in a loud, carrying voice, "just as I once was. I hope that you will take them to your hearts, and that the north will be good to them, as it has been to me."

At that, people pressed forward, smiling, to help the newcomers down.

"And a troublesome bundle they've been," the high chief muttered. Taking Alaric's arm, he pushed through the throng toward his own tent. On the way he beckoned to Kata, who had stood aloof from the welcoming crowd. Inside, he set his hands on his hips and looked from one of them to the other. "Has all been well since I left?"

"Quite well," said Kata.

"Good. And with you, my son?"

"Well enough. Though I missed your laugh."

Simir smiled. "I missed your songs. It was a long journey." The smile faded. "But a successful one."

Alaric looked down at the rug beneath his feet.

"You had other success, I hope," said Kata.

Simir nodded. "Four bags of the plants. And not a Red Lord's man did we see. Just this ragtag bunch, half-dead of hunger."

"You could have left them to the other half," Kata said. "We have our own mouths to feed, and there's a hard winter coming."

"We couldn't leave them; they might have set him free. And what do nine more mouths mean to us? We'll manage."

"No hunters among them, I'll warrant."

"They'll learn."

"They gathered roots and berries in the mountains," said Alaric. "They had no bows for hunting."

Both Simir and Kata looked to him.

"I met them there, some months since. They were eleven then."

"They swore they were only nine," said Simir. "If we left two hiding in the mountains. . . ." He frowned deeply.

Alaric said, "I'll find out."

The leader of the newcomers stood at one of the more distant fires, taking a bowl of stew from the hands of a stout matron. When he noticed Alaric on the other side of the flames, he almost dropped the bowl. "You!"

"Good eve, Berown," said Alaric.

"So *this* is where you came from."

"No, I am a guest among them, as you are."

"Guest! Is that what you call it?" His eyes darted to the two men who stood some paces off, swords buckled to their waists, watching him.

"Better to live here than die in the mountains," said Alaric. "They're good folk, and you'll be happy among them. Malgis and Daugas would have been happy, too. Why aren't they with you?"

Berown's lips pressed together whitely. "Don't you know?"

Alaric frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You lured them with your talk of a soft life in the south. Where were you leading them? To death, or to something worse? Some foul witch's place, wasn't it, where you'd drain their blood and use it in your brews?"

Witch. The word seemed to freeze Alaric's very marrow. He wanted to shrink away, to use that witch's power to escape. He fought the impulse with all his strength. "Berown—"

"They told us about you! They saw you use your witch's magic. Before their eyes, you melted away like mist. Daugas said so, and he was no fool!"

"Daugas was hungry," Alaric said firmly. "Hunger can make the mind play strange tricks. Whatever he thought he saw was in his imagination, nothing more. I'm no witch!"

Berown spat on the ground. "Malgis was mad before you found us; but she was madder still after running from you. She wouldn't stay in the mountains any longer; she said she wanted to go home. So she went down into the valley, in full daylight, and no one could keep Daugas from going after her. We never saw either of them again."

"Berown —"

"Your fault, witch! You lured them, and when they realized your lure was evil, they lost all hope." He backed off a pace. "And here we all are, in your clutches." Abruptly, he threw his bowl to the ground, and its contents splashed the fire. "Have I lived so long as an exile just to come to this?"

"Berown, listen to me! I am not a witch. I don't know what Malgis and Daugas thought they saw, or dreamed they saw. I only tried to lead them to safety. But she was afraid. *She* turned back. Not from fear of *me*, Berown, but from fear of the outside world. That was her madness, and, finally, *it* made her go home." He felt an ache behind his eyes as he remembered her pathetic, emaciated face. "I tried to help you, Berown. You know that. I never meant you any harm."

"They died because of you."

Alaric shook his head. "Because of themselves."

He saw the man waver, saw the clash of fear and anger in his face give way to uncertainty.

"I am sorry about them, truly sorry. I would have it otherwise, I swear. But the nine of you, at least, are safe now."

Berown straightened his back at that and looked around, wariness in his eyes. "Safe?" he said. "Safe among our enemies?"

"Not yours. Not anymore." He backed off a few steps, and when Berown did not move, he turned and walked away.

Halfway to Simir's fire, he felt a tug at his sleeve: the woman who had served Berown his dinner. "Are you truly not a witch, minstrel?" she asked.

He tried to smile at her. "No, kind lady, I am not."

"What a shame," she murmured, and let him go.

THAT EVENING, at a fire some distance from the camp, where he and Simir could sit alone, he told the high chief about himself —about the long road behind him and the people left along the way; about troubles that his witch's power had caused him, and saved him from; about the doubts and fears that had driven him. It was a long chronicle, and Malgis and Daugas made only a small part of it; still, in spite of all that he had said to Berown, he felt the weight of their deaths on his shoulders.

"Kata was right," he murmured. "I am a coward. I could have saved them in spite of their fear. I had only to take them away, kicking and struggling as

they might, and then they could never have gone back to the valley."

"It isn't easy to make other people's decisions for them," said Simir. "One learns that, as high chief."

"I wanted to help. At the end, all I could do was steal a few goats for them."

"I remember they spoke of goats. They had eaten the last one some time before we arrived."

Alaric shook his head. "So even there, I failed them."

Simir set a hand on his ankle. "You didn't fail them, my son. You gave them more than they had before."

"But I could have done far more."

Simir looked at Alaric thoughtfully. "Tell me, what is it that you really wish you had done for these people?"

Alaric took a deep breath. "I wish that I had killed the Red Lord."

The high chief nodded.

"But I was afraid. And the longer I put it off, the more afraid I became. After a time, I convinced myself that there were good reasons not to kill him. His people needed him, with a terrible, twisted need. I told myself that folk who felt that way even deserved him, and that, at any rate, they would never thank me for the deed. So I turned my back on it. And on them."

"You could have done it, I suppose," Simir murmured.

"I think so. But there was danger, of course. So I gave them goats instead." He felt the pain behind his eyes again, the heat of tears that would not come. In his mind's eye, Malgis's face was overlaid with that other woman's, that victim of artful damage whose pain he had ended with his sword. "Only goats."

Simir sighed. "I have no answer for you, my son."

Softly, Alaric said, "I could still do it. I could be there before you could blink your eyes, hunt him down in his own castle, stab him to the heart. But I won't. Because I'm still afraid."

Simir gripped his arm. "You're one of us now. Your concerns are here, not in the valley."

Alaric looked into his face. Yes, he thought, *this is a man who knows what failure is. Not cowardice, but at least failure.* "I suppose you are right."

"You'll understand when winter comes. You won't have time to worry about the past then. The northern winter takes all a man has in him, and more."

"So I've heard."

"We'll manage, though, together. They are strong and determined people, these nomads of the north."

Alaric smiled a little. "You love them very much, don't you?"

"They've been good to me. It's easy to love goodness."

Alaric leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Tell me, did you know any of our new arrivals . . . before? Berown, their leader, was one of the Red Lord's men. . . ."

"I knew him, a little. He was just a boy then, a fresh recruit, but already a bully. Like the rest of us."

"He'll cause trouble, I think."

"He caused trouble on the way north. I expect more before he settles down. You should stay out of his way for now. I doubt that a few words truly convinced him that you're not a witch, and he needs some time in the north before he understands our feelings toward witches. Kata must work on him, on all of them."

Alaric nodded, though he suspected that Kata was more likely to add to their fear than allay it.

"I won't say I didn't think of leaving them somewhere along the way, somewhere like the band where we borrowed the extra deer. But it was my idea to bring them along, and so they are my responsibility." He pointed to Alaric. "As you are."

"I'll stay away from him."

"Well, you'll be with me a good part of the time, so you won't have much chance to fall afoul of him. I missed your songs, Alaric; I missed them mightily on that long journey." He smiled. "My ears thirsted for the sound of your lute as a dying man thirsts for water on the endless desert sands."

"What do you know of desert sands?" Alaric said, smiling, too.

"Only what you've told me in your songs. Come, my Alaric, let us go back to the camp and spend the evening as we used to. In wine and song and laughter."

"Yes," said Alaric, scrambling up and dashing out the fire with one swipe of his foot. "Yes."

Having taken part in weapons practice in Simir's absence, Alaric found it hard to give up. Not because he loved it so, but because, if he stayed away for more than a few days, his regular adversaries would cajole him into

coming back — more, he guessed because he was easy to defeat than because he gave them any challenge. He had improved with practice, but he was still a novice to all but the youngest of the nomad men. Still, he found some pleasure in the exercise, if only in the memories that it brought him, of one who had sparred with him in a castle courtyard and given him a fine sword for friendship's sake.

Berown watched the weapons practice some afternoons. No one asked him to join, of course, for he was still guarded by two men. But he watched, with an air of mild interest, as he might watch a blacksmith at his trade.

Afterward, Alaric realized his indifference must have cloaked something much hotter.

How it began, he never quite understood — what particular thing provoked it. Later, witnesses said that Berown's guards had been lax for some time, seeing nothing much worth watching in him.

Alaric had been talking to one of his erstwhile opponents, standing with his sword-point against the ground. He never knew whether he heard Berown's rush or just *felt* it somehow, a vibration in the soil, like the pounding hooves of a war-horse. He turned, and the man was there, looming, steel in his hand and rage in his face. There was no time to call for help, no time even to raise the sword and block the falling blow. Death looked into Alaric's eyes, and instinct claimed him. He vanished.

He found himself far to the south, beyond the mountains. Safe. As he had always managed to be safe.

He shook his head sharply and gripped the sword with rigid hands. They had all seen, a dozen and more of them; there was no escaping it. In an instant, Berown had stripped him naked to their eyes. *Then let it be so*, he thought, his teeth clenched so hard they ached. He would not run away this time.

He willed himself back to the north, but a short space from the practice field, where the grass was high and no men stood.

He saw them all before anyone saw him. They had fallen back from Berown, a ragged, wary circle in whose center the fugitive from the Red Lord's valley swung his stolen sword with vicious swiftness, and turned, turned, so that no one could strike him from behind. Then someone caught sight of Alaric and shouted and pointed, and a great commotion arose.

They were cheering.

They had seen, and they were cheering.

Alaric felt a great love well up inside him for every man on that practice field, and just for a moment his vision blurred. He dashed the tears away with the back of one arm and straightened his spine.

"Stand aside, all of you!" he shouted. "He is mine!"

They obeyed instantly. Berown was left alone, still slashing at air, but turning no longer. "Face me, witch!" he roared.

Alaric did face him, in his own special way, appearing behind him, before him, to his left, his right, flickering like a flame, hardly there before he was gone again. Berown slashed a dozen times, shouting hoarsely, but he wounded only empty air. Alaric's sword flickered with him, feinting, teasing till at last it struck with a loud slap — not the edge but the flat of the blade, a stinging blow to Berown's calf. Another to his buttocks, a third to his belly, almost doubling him over with its force. Another to his head, to knock him over, and then Alaric's boot stamped on his sword hand, and the blade went spinning free.

"Yield!" Alaric shouted, the point of his own blade against Berown's throat. He saw that throat work as Berown tried to speak and failed. He eased the blade back a finger's-breadth, enough to let the man nod.

Alaric stepped back, then prudently sidled to the fallen sword and picked it up. Berown made no move to rise. For a long moment he stared up at the sky, and then, very slowly, he turned on his side and curled his body, drawing his knees up, hugging his crossed arms to his chest. He began to weep.

Alaric turned away from him, holding the second sword high. "Does this belong to someone?"

A man came forward to claim it, and then the circle of onlookers broke, and the nomads surrounded Alaric, shouting and laughing, every one of them trying to grip his arm or clap him on the back. He laughed himself, leaning on his sword in the midst of the hubbub, loving them all. He laughed, wild and free and joyous. Around him the crowd grew and grew, till nearly all of Simir's band had enveloped him, and he felt his heart expanding to encompass them all. Zavia shouldered her way through the throng to throw her arms around him, and he kissed her soundly, loving her even more than the rest.

"I knew it was true!" She had to shout to be heard above the clamor. "The strangers spread the story; everyone must have heard it by now. You could have told *me*."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Only a little." And she hugged him again.

The crowd parted to let Simir through. His face was anxious at first, but when he saw Alaric smiling, he smiled, too. "So it's out in the open now," he said. "And see how empty your worries were! This is the north, Alaric. Everything is different here!"

"I believe that now," said the minstrel. "I hope Berown may come to believe it, too. He hesitated. "He's not well, I think. Perhaps I hit his head too hard."

Simir's smile turned crooked. "Anyone else would have killed him."

Alaric shook his head.

"Still, you have your victory," said Simir, "and one these folk won't soon forget. Come," and he raised his voice to the crowd, "let us toast Alaric's triumph with wine all around. Let us drink to the skills of our newfound witch." He put his big arm around Alaric, and around Zavias as well. "Simir's band is so rich in magic — how lucky we are here in the north!"

Berown would not rise from the ground, would not even uncurl his arms and legs, and in the end they had to bring a litter to transport him to Kata's tent. Two days and a night she kept him, and when he left her at last, he was a different man, walking slow and slope-shouldered, as if he carried a heavy rock on his back. He no longer spoke, and his eyes were dull.

"She has soothed his soul," Simir told the minstrel.

Alaric nodded. "But at what price? He was a leader once, even if his people were ragged and starving. Now he has nothing, perhaps not even himself. I pity him."

"He tried to kill you."

"Even so."

Simir shrugged. "He's lived a tragic time. Will you make a song of him?"

"I don't know. I'm not in the mood for tragic times just now."

He could not remember being happier. The endless trek beneath the summer sky, the long evenings of song and laughter, the nights with Zavias in his arms — he could not think of what more he might ask of life. And since learning his secret, the nomads looked at him with new respect, and new fascination.

He thought nothing of it when a woman who had served him a few

meals, a woman of middle years, but still handsome enough, caught his arm one evening and whispered an invitation in his ear. A minstrel grew accustomed to such invitations; the lure of the stranger was strong, and a good voice, charm, and youth enhanced it. He smiled at her but shook his head. Zavia, he said, was enough for him.

Some nights later a second woman asked, and later still, a third. It was the third who told him bluntly what she wanted of him: not his body for its own sake, but his magic for her hunter husband. As Kata could give a man hunting magic, so — she thought — could Alaric transmit his power to a man through her.

"I'm sorry," he told her, "but this power is mine alone; I have no way of passing it to someone else."

She went away disappointed, but her disappointment did not keep other women from asking for their own husbands. Nearly every night he had to give the same answer to someone else. Knowing magic as they did, he realized, they could not believe that he might be unable to grant their wish.

"Yes, a male witch could have his pick of the women, once each at least," Simir said, when Alaric told him about the invitations. "It might be a pleasant time, as well as a duty."

"But how can I make them believe that it won't help them?"

And Simir smiled and said, "Perhaps you can't."

Alaric knew that Zavia had noticed the whisperings, but she said nothing; indeed, she smiled more broadly when he came away from them.

Kata was the one who called him to account.

"So we have a new witch practicing among us," she said when he had answered her peremptory summons. There was a glint in her eye at odds with her usual cool expression, and not a pleasant glint. "I hear you're much in demand, my Alaric."

He looked down at the carpet. "They may demand, Lady, but I have nothing to give. Perhaps . . . you could explain that to them; they don't seem to believe me."

"Why should they? It was a pretty display you put on, with your sword and your nimbleness. How could it fail to impress them? Now they ask of you what they would ask of any witch."

Alaric shook his head. "Lady, I meant only to save my life."

"You could have accomplished *that* by vanishing and never returning."

He looked up sharply. "No. That would have saved my skin, but not the life I've found here in the north."

"And what life would that be, my Alaric?" Her cold, pale eyes narrowed. "Not the minstrel's life, no, not anymore. Your name is in every mouth, but not as a minstrel. They speak of you as they speak of me, as if we two were equals. As if this paltry power you were born with could be as great as the wisdom I have spent my life uncovering." Her voice deepened, became almost harsh. "And yet, my Alaric, I hold you . . ." She raised a hand toward him, empty palm upward, and she closed the fingers tight on that emptiness. ". . . here."

For a moment he could not tear his gaze from her fist. The smell of sweet spice seemed to swirl about him, and he felt, for just an instant, that he had shrunk to a mite and was standing inside those caging fingers, struggling. Then he shook himself and realized that she had dropped her hand, and he lifted his eyes to hers. "What can I do, Lady? I've told them. . . ."

"Then you must show them."

"In what way could I—"

"You must serve me on my next journey to the Great Waste. Only so will they understand that you are no better than they."

"The Great Waste?"

"You wished to visit the Northern Sea, did you not? We'll pass it on our way."

"Pass it? In the south, they say the Northern Sea is the end of the world."

"They are fools in the south." Then a slight smile curved her lips. "Or perhaps not, for it is not *this* world that lies beyond, but a different one."

"Different? In what way?"

"That, only those who have gone there know. Well?"

Alaric bowed to her. There was only one possible answer. "I am yours to command, Lady."

"The journey is hard and dangerous."

"I've known hardship and danger before."

"You think your witch's power will protect you. But you must swear to me that you will not use it."

"Lady—"

"You must swear. We go to gather magic on this journey, and it must

be done properly. Using your power may destroy what we seek; we dare not chance it."

He hesitated. Not to use his power, to face danger exactly as other people did — that was a hard promise to keep. And yet he saw that he must keep it, must obey Kata in every particular, or lose her goodwill forever. "How many others go with you?"

"Four, all men who have made the trip before."

"And how long will you be gone?"

"We return before the first snow flies."

"A long journey, then."

"Farther than back to the mountains. But summer is short here in the north, and the first snow comes sooner than you might think. Well, my Alaric, will you come, or are you too much afraid of doing without your magic?"

He took a deep breath. "I *am* afraid," he said. "But I am curious, too. I would see this different world you speak of. Perhaps there's a song or two in it. When do we leave?"

"As soon as supplies can be made ready."

SIMIR'S FACE showed his displeasure at the news, but he said nothing. Instead, he ordered one of his own deer slaughtered and the meat smoke-dried for the journey. And he gave Alaric his best fur cloak to take along, "Because I have been to the Waste, and I know how cold the nights are."

Zavia was furious, though she showed that fury only when they were alone in her tent. "What have I done to her?" she demanded. She raised both fists to the blank wall beyond which her mother's tent was pitched. "Why must she take you from me?"

"I doubt she was thinking of you, my Zavia," Alaric murmured.

"She never thinks of me! Her own daughter, her heir, but my happiness is meaningless."

He put his arms around her. "Dear Zavia, we won't be gone very long."

She looked into his eyes, and her own were wide and wild, like some mountain cat's. "I won't let you go. I won't!"

He shook his head. "This is important to her. She must be sure of me. I don't want her to look on me as a rival."

"Why not? A little competition might do her good."

He kissed her cheek. "You're the one who'll be her competition someday. You have the fire for it. But I am just a minstrel." And when she would have answered that, he set two hushing fingers against her lips. "No, don't say I'm more. I won't be more." He kissed her again. "And I'll have peace between myself and your mother, so that you and I can be happy."

She clung to him. "You'll be careful, won't you? I've heard stories about the Waste. They say the very ground can open and swallow you up."

"I'll be careful. After all, I value myself even more than you do."

"That can't be possible," she said fiercely.

When the meat was dried nearly as hard as wood, Kata's small company made ready to leave the band. The four who had made the journey with her before were strong men, hunters all. The youngest, Grem, was nearly old enough to be Alaric's father; the others — Lanri, Velet, and Oltavin — had grandchildren already. None bore sole responsibility for a family, in case, Kata said, they never came back.

They had two tents among them, one for the men and a smaller one for Kata — special tents, marked with the symbol of the Pole Star, guardian of their journey. These, and food and hooded furs and the many bundles that belonged to Kata, were enough to load all of their riding deer and three pack animals besides. They were leaving behind all metal save for their short knives, the men even trading their fine barbed hunting arrows for stone-tipped shafts fashioned by Kata herself; metal, Grem said, could not be trusted in the far north. And though it was not metal save for its strings, Alaric had to leave the lute behind as well, for Kata insisted there would be neither time nor strength for song on their journey. He doubted that, but he said nothing, understanding that she would be jealous of everything about him on this trip, everything that might detract from her own importance.

They set out just past noon, riding silent and steady, Kata in the lead. They rode through the whole long summer day, eating their dried meat on deer-back, stopping only for water and to answer nature's calls, and by dusk they had traveled farther than in three or four days of nomad wandering. After tethering their deer by long ropes that would let the animals graze, they set up their tents. But before they curled up to sleep the brief darkness away, Kata made them all bow to the north, and she took off the large brooch she had donned for the journey, a brooch with the symbol of

the Pole Star worked in gold wire within its circle, and she held it out to the sky, as if offering it to the first faint glimmer of its namesake.

The next day they set off at dawn and rode till twilight, and the next, and the next, and soon the days began to blend together for Alaric. One stretch of rolling plain seemed like another, one meandering watercourse, with its accompanying double file of trees, twin to the last. And yet one day — it might have been ten days after they left the band, or eleven — they crossed a stream where the trees were unusually short. That was also the day Alaric realized that, hot as the summer sun might be, the wind — when it blew from the north — was chill. At the next stream the trees were not merely short, but sparse and weirdly stunted, their trunks growing sideways, almost hard against the ground, their boughs gnarled and twisted, like thick, exposed roots with a scanty covering of leafy twigs.

"And that's the last of them," Grem said, and it was true. Beyond, the river made a long, sweeping northward curve, and its banks were open, covered with short grass, wildflowers, and herbs; there was not a tree in sight to the horizon.

The plain grew boggy after that, and the grass thinned, exposing great open patches of sandy soil, ridges of gravel, and boulders marked by growing things as if by daubs of paint. A thousand ponds dotted the landscape, and by night the north wind, blowing ever colder, would rime them with ice. The daylight that thawed the ice now lasted longer than Alaric could ever remember, the sun easing to its rest at such a shallow angle to the horizon that it seemed reluctant to leave the sky; and in its wake, twilight seemed nearly endless. The travelers began camping before sunset and sleeping well past dawn, else they would have been too tired to ride through the day.

At last, mountains appeared in the distance.

Kata called a halt as soon as the peaks were plain to see — jagged peaks, steep and dark and forbidding, stretching far to the east and west, like a vast line of spears draped loosely with black canvas.

"This is the first magical region on our journey," she said to Alaric. "Be sure your knife is well secured."

He glanced down at the blade, which sat firmly in its sheath, as always. But that was not enough for Kata. She mentioned to Grem, who helped Alaric lash it fast with thongs. Grem's own knife was already bound in the same fashion.

"Don't try to use it till I give you leave," Kata said.

"Is this a place where metal can't be trusted?" Alaric asked.

She nodded. Then, reaching into the bundle that hung behind her right leg, she pulled out a small metal box. It was a cunningly made container, a trifle larger than her fingers could span, its top chased with the symbol of the Pole Star. Tilting back the lid revealed that the metal walls were thick, leaving only a tiny empty space inside. Kata unpinned the brooch she wore upon her bosom, set it in the box, and shut the top.

"Is gold even less trustworthy than steel?" Alaric wondered.

She cast him a cold glance. "The Pole Star looks after its own," she said. "Be it metal or flesh." Then she gave him a longer look. "Perhaps we would both do well to remember that."

He smiled slightly, thinking of the symbols on their tents. "I remember it every night."

At his smile, her lips tightened, but she said no more.

The mountains looked high at first, and very far away, but Alaric soon realized that was just an illusion. Rugged they were, as if some enormous ax had hewn them out, but they were neither distant nor lofty. They were, in fact, mountains in miniature; he had seen man-built towers taller, and castle keeps with as much girth. He and his companions rode like giants through the narrow passes, and they could have shot their arrows over the peaks.

But the strangest aspect of those mountains was not their size, but their form. They were completely barren, and everywhere the naked rocks were split and broken into countless points and serrations, like myriad fingers reaching for the sky. Streaked with shades of red and rust and brown and a steely gray so dark it was almost black, those stony ramparts showed a single texture everywhere, a striated surface, a grain that looked almost to be carved upon them by a sculptor's tool. And all the striations, all the shards and ridges, were precisely aligned, all of them tilted from the vertical, so that the whole range of miniature mountains was tipped to the south, bristling toward the travelers like an irregular palisade of sharpened stakes.

Alaric rode through them wide-eyed and wondering, and once he brushed so close to an outcropping that he could not resist reaching out to touch it. He caught at a needlelike shard, intending to break it off, but fragile though it seemed, it would not come loose. Then Grem, riding be-

hind him, called to him to leave it be, and Kata turned and said the same, but sharper.

"This magic we don't take away with us," she told him.

"Is it magic?" he wondered. "Yes, if there is any true magic in the world, it must be here. But of what sort?"

Kata's mouth made the smallest of smiles. "There is more true magic in the world than you can guess, my Alaric." From one of her bundles, she drew an arrow, not a stone-tipped one, but one of the ordinary arrows the nomads made, with a point of barbed steel. She handed the shaft to Lanri, saying, "Here, show him the faithlessness of metal."

Lanri fitted the arrow to his bow and, pointing to a spur of reddish stone, an easy target not far off, loosed it. But the shaft never reached its goal; instead, it swerved in midflight and struck much nearer — struck and clung to the rock face as if glued there, point and shaft both hard against the stone.

Alaric rode up to the arrow and, wrapping his fingers about the shaft, gave it a sharp tug. But his strength merely cracked the wood just behind the barbs; the steel tip was caught fast, though nothing visible was holding it.

"Lodestone," said Alaric.

"So you know something of lodestones, do you?" Kata said, the smile gone from her lips.

"I've seen small ones that would fit in my hand. Children's toys, they are in the south. Except in one place, where a man I met once, who called himself a witch, ground them up and used them for spell-casting."

"Spell-casting?" She leaned forward between her deer's antlers. "What sort of spell-casting?"

"Several different sorts." He shrugged. "But as far as I could see, none of them ever came to anything."

She straightened abruptly. "Bah. The witches of the south are fools."

"I've long thought that, Lady."

"We have the true magic here in the north, my Alaric. Don't think otherwise. These" — she waved to encompass all the harsh, low mountains — "these are the guardians of that magic. Beyond lies a land such as you have never dreamed of."

"I look forward to it."

Her frown was as small as her smile. "It pleases me," she said, "that you are not afraid."

Only when they were upon it did he realize that the whiteness was an enormous wall of ice.

They passed through the miniature mountains in a single long day's ride, but beyond, at least for a time, lay no strange and frightening land but merely more of the boggy plain. When the mountains were well behind them, Kata brought out her brooch once more, offering it with open hand to the north before fastening it to her jerkin. Then the journey resumed.

Alaric scarcely noticed the whiteness in the distance. He thought it a cloud bank, like so many others in the pale northern sky. But he noticed the wind, which was now bitter by night, and so chill even during the day that the travelers had begun to wear their furs. He did not think of the whiteness as a source of that cold, even though it loomed larger ahead of them day by day, never moving, as if waiting for them. Only when they were almost upon it did he realize that the whiteness was an enormous wall of ice.

Higher than any human-built rampart, the wall swept eastward to the limit of vision, its face a slope of icy rubble, of tumbled, broken blocks as big as a peasant's hut. To the west the barrier thrust abruptly into a great gray sea whose steep verge then angled away southwestwardly; and upon that sullen surface floated fallen icy chunks of every size, like gobbets of bread in a vast dish of soup. As the travelers watched, standing a hundred paces back from the shore, a huge white slab broke free of the wall of ice and slid with a thundering crash into the water, raising a wave that washed up almost to their feet.

"The Northern Sea," said Kata. "Well, my Alaric, your wish is granted at last."

He looked up, up at the white barrier. "Do we turn east now?"

"No," she said, and she pointed to the broken face of the wall. "We climb."

Only five of them went, with no baggage but some coils of rope. Had Alaric not given his promise, he would have flashed to the top of that icy rampart in a heartbeat. Still, it was not a bad climb, not after Kata had lashed wooden cleats to their boots and passed around tent poles to be hammered into the ice for support. The surface was well compacted, al-

most as firm underfoot as stone and soil, and in most places no more treacherous than many a mountain slope.

Atop the wall, Alaric found himself at the edge of a new world. To the south stretched the plain; to the west, sea. And to the north the ice beneath his feet was the beginning of a landscape flatter than any grass-land, and of a white so intense, so brilliant beneath the afternoon sun, that it pained the eyes to look upon. The wall had been no barrier to the farther north at all; rather, it was the farther north, with not a blade of grass, not a flower, on its bosom to the horizon.

"The Great Waste," said Kata, encompassing it with a hand.

Oltavin had stayed below with the supplies; now the others tied their ropes end to end and let the line down so that he could send packs up to them. He would be remaining behind, where the deer could graze, while they continued north.

Well prepared for this new world, Kata had stiff muslin masks, darkly translucent, to shield their eyes against the glare; and strange wooden hoops, webbed with thongs, to lash to their boots for walking across the crusty frozen surface. They moved on as soon as they had all donned this new equipment.

They walked late that day, though Alaric could gauge that lateness only by the ache in his legs. Darkness no longer marked an end to the day; the sun, after sinking and sinking toward the ice, barely touched the horizon and then began to rise again, as if repelled by the cold. The travelers stopped at last, set up their tents, and slept till Kata woke them; and the sun stood high for the beginning of their next march. Thereafter, it was always above the horizon, riding an enormous circular path in the sky; and it seemed to Alaric that on the Great Waste, he and his companions were walking, sleeping, walking on, all in a single endless day.

Kata led the way steadily northward. Most people, Alaric knew, would have lost all sense of direction by now, with no stars to guide them, and the sun behaving so strangely, and not a landmark anywhere. He had not; his sense of direction did not depend on external guideposts, but on an instinctive awareness of his own movements; it was of a piece with his witch's power, born to him. For a time he thought Kata must have it, too, and then, walking close beside her, he watched her hold her brooch out to the north . . . and he saw what had escaped him till now. At the touch of her thumb, a tiny post thrust up from the center of the ornament, bringing

with it a flattened needle that had been resting nearly invisible upon the device of the Pole Star. Pierced midway along its length by the post, the needle swung freely on that pivot, and no matter how Kata turned the brooch, the needle's point always bore to the north.

She noticed him staring at it. "Do you think you can read this better than I, minstrel?" she said sharply.

He shook his head. "I would not presume so, Lady, since I've never seen its like before. But tell me, does it point north permanently, or is there some way to change its bearing?"

She curled her fingers about the brooch. "Have they no north-seeking needles where you come from?"

"I've seen none."

At a flick of her thumb, the needle sank back flush with the gold device. She refastened the brooch to her bosom. "So they know lodestones in the south, but not the needle that seeks the Pole Star." Her mouth curved with the faintest hint of contempt. "This is the most ancient of magic, my Alaric — from the morning of the world. Who does not know *this*, knows nothing. Small wonder you never believed in any magic but your own."

Alaric would have shrugged, but his pack was too heavy. "I believe in the evidence of my eyes, Lady. And they have seen much fakery among those who call themselves magicians and witches."

She nodded slightly. "Turning water to wine, I suppose, and plucking small animals from empty bowls. Tricks to awe the gullible." She turned her face to him. "It would seem they have lost all the important knowledge of the past. The knowledge that we of the north still cherish, of the *real* power that lies all around us, like a net encompassing the world. And perhaps that is only proper, for that power issues from the north itself; and so who should be worthier of it than the people who call that place their home?" She looked back to the icy way that stretched before them. "A true witch spends a lifetime learning to use that power, and believe me, few have the ability and fewer the patience. Yet the reward for ability and patience is great, my Alaric: the power of life and death, the power that chooses between sickness and health, between the full belly and starvation, between the storm and the calm — that is the real magic the world offers us. That is *my* magic."

Softly, he said, "I don't doubt your power, Lady."

"You don't know my power, minstrel."

"Then I must judge it by the respect your people have for you. By which measure, it must be great indeed."

Her head barely tilted toward him. "You have a flattering tongue, Alaric. It comes of depending on strangers for your meat. But leave off with me; words will not win you my favor."

Alaric smiled a little. "I had hopes that these many days I've ridden and walked in your service, and these many nights I've shivered, might count somewhat toward that end."

"You have done your duty," she said.

He sighed. *Well, he thought, at least I've done the work of a good pack deer.*

And he also thought: *I am a stranger; I must not judge what I haven't seen.* She had potent potions — that was true enough — and smoke that befuddled a man, and a presence to cow the bravest warrior. But he could not help wondering if her claims might not exceed her abilities, if she might not be using her own rather potent tricks to awe the less gullible folk of the north.

He especially wondered, just now, about her ability to control the weather. For a storm was rising.

The wind came first, blowing from the north, as usual, but colder than ever, and stronger. And with that cold wind came thick clouds running like sheep before the wolf. The snow arrived before the travelers had finished setting up their tents — tiny flakes gusting before the wind, stinging exposed flesh like needles. Alaric was the last man inside the larger tent; and as he laced the entry flaps, he saw through their narrow gap that Kata had not gone inside her own shelter at all, but was still standing out in the storm, her arms raised to the sky.

In the darkness of their tent, the men held fast to the bottom edges of its leathern walls, to give them extra anchorage against the storm. The wind grew wilder and began to howl an eerie, high-pitched note. Intermittently, it shook the shelter as a dog might shake a rat, and more than once it found an entry, beneath a flap or at a seam, and sent a spray of snow-laden air to chill the space that had been warmed by their bodies and breath.

But for all its force, the storm was short-lived, and though a mountain of snow seemed to have tumbled from the sky, little of it was left behind,

only a shallow drift against the northern wall of each tent; the rest had been scoured away by the wind, scattered upon the vast, flat plain of ice. A summer storm, the nomad men said as they emerged from their shelter — nothing to be concerned about. Yet each of them touched one of the tent's Pole Star symbols as he spoke, and when Kata came out of her tent, they thanked her, as if she had been responsible for the storm being so brief and mild.

Alaric thanked her, too. It seemed the proper thing to do.

But it made her look at him long and searchingly before she ordered the march to resume.

IT WAS the day after the storm — they had slept, at any rate, in the interim — that Zavia's fear came true.

They had been walking as they often did, Kata in front, the rest strung out behind her. Alaric trailed the group, for no special reason — he had done so often enough. There was no reason, either, for him to lift his eyes above the heels of the man ahead, for he knew there was nothing to see in any direction. And so, when he heard a strange creaking sound, as of a rusty hinge being forced, and when the man he followed stopped suddenly and gave a wild cry, he did not know what had happened.

He looked up and saw the flat white landscape. He saw Lanri and Velet, three and four paces ahead of him. He saw Kata, just turning back to face them.

Grem, who had walked behind her, was gone.

He took two quick steps forward, and Lanri's arm shot out to halt him. It was then that he saw the crack in the ice between the three of them and Kata. And from within the crack came Grem's voice, shouting for help, echoing, as if from far away.

"Don't go near!" Kata called. Shedding her webbed footgear, she lay down on the ice spread-eagled and crawled to the lip of the opening. It was a man-height wide, and so long that its ends were invisible with distance. She looked down into it, then shook her head. "We can't help him," she said. "We'll have to look for a narrow place where you can cross."

Grem's shout came again, more high-pitched than before, more desperate.

Alaric pulled off his thong-meshed hoops and squirmed to the edge of the crack, ignoring Kata's sharp "Stay back!" The opening was deep and

heavily shadowed; he could see no bottom. But he could hear Grem clearly. And the sound of splashing water.

"Can you see me?" he shouted, waving one arm as far over the chasm as he dared.

"Yes, yes, yes!" called Grem.

"We must get him out!" Alaric said.

"No!" cried Kata. "He is lost."

"Toss the rope down to him. There are three of us here to anchor it." He turned to Lanri. "You have the rope."

Lanri glanced at Kata, then back at Alaric.

"It won't be long enough," said Kata. "These cracks are deep. And the freezing water brings death quickly. Get back from the edge before you fall in, too."

"We have to try," said Alaric. "We can't just leave him here to die!" He wrenched at Lanri's pack. "You won't stand by and do nothing, will you?"

"He is lost!" shouted Kata.

Lanri hesitated another moment, then he began to uncoil the rope. Quickly, he, Velet, and Alaric each took a turn of it about their prone bodies and dropped the free end down into the crack.

"Grem, can you see the rope?" called Alaric.

There was no answer.

"Grem!"

"He's lost," said Kata.

"Or injured, unable to catch hold of it. Grem!"

The voice was fainter than before. But the words were still clear: "Help me."

"One of us will have to go down," said Alaric. He looked at Kata. "I believe I'm the lightest."

"No!"

"You'd want me to do it if you were down there!"

She showed her teeth at that, but said nothing.

"I'll hold him fast," he said to Lanri and Velet. "Pull us up as quick as you can."

Lanri nodded.

Alaric slipped out of his pack and threw off his mittens and furs. The air was sharply cold, but he scarcely noticed it; he was sweating. He reeled the rope in, knotted a loop in the end, and pulled it tight under his armpits.

He cast Kata one final glance. "Remember," he said, "you made me promise. That means there's no other way."

She said nothing.

As they lowered him into the shadowed depths of the crack, he pulled his muslin mask down. Without it, the shadows were not so dark as he had thought; rather, they were blue with light filtering through the ice. Below, he could just make out where ice and water met, and the water was black as pitch. Of Grem, he saw nothing.

When his descent finally halted, he hung in the air, his heels dangling just above the dark water. "Grem!" he shouted, and the name echoed all around him. "Grem!"

A moment later a splash answered him, and Grem's head broke the surface. The man coughed and choked and made wordless noises as he flailed weakly at the water.

"More rope!" Alaric shouted. "Just a little!"

In response, he was eased downward till his ankles were submerged, then his knees. The water was bitterly cold; he could feel it seeping into his boots, and it burned his feet like fire. He grabbed for Grem, caught the man's fur wrapping; he was heavy, his clothing waterlogged. He clutched at Alaric, at his waist at first, and then, his grip slipping, at the minstrel's legs. Alaric tried to peel Grem's furs away and lighten the load, but the thongs that held them were knotted too tight. He locked his legs about the man then, and shouted to be lifted upward.

Slowly, jerkily, he rose from the water. His knees were clear. His ankles. His feet. And then, of a sudden, the weight on his legs was too much, and the loop of rope could not hold him — he was ripped down through it, arms snapped upward beside his ears, and he was in the water, deep, deep, and his mouth was full of its freezing, salty taste.

The cold bit to his marrow. His limbs went numb, and he knew he was sinking fast. But Grem was beneath him. He willed his arms to clutch the man, and they sank together. Dizziness assailed him, as he felt rather than saw the yawning darkness below.

And a heartbeat later they were falling through air, falling for a long, long moment, and then they struck an unyielding surface, and it knocked the breath from Alaric's lungs and the water from his throat.

Gasping, he lay with his cheek against the ice. He was not cold; he was past that. He felt nothing but an all-encompassing languor; he knew he

was too weak to move, too weak even to open his eyes. Vaguely, he heard someone speaking, but the sound seemed muffled, distant. Then hands were lifting him, shaking him, stripping his clothing away, and wrapping him in something. Furs. Someone slapped his face. And again.

He opened his eyes. He was inside the large tent. A thin line of light seeped in where the entry flap had been loosely laced, showing Velet and Lanri crouched over him. Lanri's hand was raised for another blow.

"Enough!" Alaric whispered hoarsely.

"Kata said to slap you till you woke," Lanri said in an apologetic tone.

"I'm all right." He sat up, clutching the furs about him. The languor and the numbness were passing, and now he began to shiver violently. He curled up inside the furs, knees against his chest. His teeth clacked together so hard that he could scarcely speak. With some effort, he managed to say, "How is Grem?"

"Grem is dead. Come, she said you should exercise."

"Dead? Are you sure?"

"Sure as I'm here with you." Through the furs he gripped Alaric's arm. "Come, minstrel, we mustn't lose you, too."

With assistance from both of them, Alaric managed to don dry clothing. Then Velet went out while Lanri helped him to his feet. He could stand in the tent, if he stooped a little, and with only two of them inside, there was room for him to thrash his arms and legs till the shivering subsided.

"I'm all right," he said again, firmly this time, and he gathered his furs tight about him and pushed past Lanri to go outside.

The other tent was up, too, a short distance away, and Velet was pacing back and forth beside it. At the entry, which was laced tightly shut, Alaric called Kata's name.

The laces slipped from their eyelets, and the flap opened to show a sliver of Kata's face. "You," she said. "Not dead, I see. And still here." She twitched the flap aside. "Come in."

Inside, illuminated by a tiny oil lamp, and enveloped by the sweet smoke that spiraled outward from that flame, lay Grem. He was covered to the neck with a fur, and above it, his face was a pale, sickly color, and his eyes were open, staring at nothing.

"You see," Kata said, "he was lost. You risked yourself for nothing."

Alaric knelt by the man and laid his fingers against Grem's neck,

where the vein of a living person would beat strong. Nothing.

"Oh yes, he's dead," said Kata. "And now get out, and I will raise him to life again. Get out!"

Outside, he stopped the pacing Velet. "Can she really do it?" he asked.

"Sometimes," was the answer.

The sun made two complete circles of the sky while the two nomad men and Alaric waited for Kata to come out of her tent. Two complete circles while they paced the ice or huddled together in their own shelter or tried to sleep. They stayed well away from the crevasse. And they watched the ice beneath their feet quite a lot, and jumped at any sudden noise. But no new crack opened.

Finally, Kata emerged, and behind her, walking shakily, came Grem.

Alaric stood very still, just staring, while the other two men hugged Grem, babbling excitedly. Grem smiled wanly; he looked like a man who had been ill for years. Slowly, he raised a trembling hand toward Alaric.

"You saved me," he said, his voice feeble and cracked.

Alaric went to him then, and gripped his hand. "Not I," he said. "She saved you." He turned to Kata. "Lady, you are a marvel. This man was dead; I swear it."

"Yes," she said. She tapped Lanri's arm with the back of her hand. "He must be exercised. But be gentle at first. Now Alaric and I must talk."

He followed her, thinking that she meant to lead him to her tent, but she walked well past it before turning back to him.

"So you forgot your promise at the last, my brave Alaric," she said, her voice low and tight. "I knew if there was any excuse for it, you would."

He gave her look for look, his eyes steady. "If you knew, Lady, then you should never have asked for that promise."

"I thought possibly, just possibly, you were a man of honor."

"You see no honor in saving a life?"

"You swore to obey me!"

"I don't recall it being quite like that."

"You place yourself under my command. And then you disobeyed me!"

"There is a higher command, Lady, in my heart at least."

Her mouth twisted. "Oh, brave words from the disobedient child! I know you never believed in my magic. You drank my potions and swooned, but to you it was all the same as a knock on the head. Oh, the south breeds fools! What is the life of one man, compared to the lives of all the people

of the north? We gather the magic of survival on this journey, and you would spoil it for the little spark of one man's existence!"

Alaric crossed his arms over his chest. "I would beg your forgiveness, Lady, except — what have I spoiled? You have raised the dead. Surely that proved your magic is undamaged. Working together, your magic . . . and mine . . . saved him. We are not at odds."

"You wished to prove me wrong," she said sharply. "And now you have witnesses to swear you crossed my will and saved a man I said was lost. You think they won't spread the tale when we return? And then what will you be but just as much a witch as before? You said you yearned to show that you were nothing beside me, but you lied? What you really want is to sweep us all north with your power and take credit for the whole journey!"

"It would be faster, would it not? All you have to do is point the way —"

She slapped him then, so hard it rocked him back. "Who is master here?" she shouted.

He raised a hand to his cheek. The flesh stung, and the bone and teeth beneath ached. "You are master," he said softly.

"Liar!"

"Lady —"

"You want my place! You show it in everything you do, in every step you take!"

She raised her hand to strike again, but he caught it this time, and they stood there frozen for a moment, till Alaric opened his own hand and let hers go. Then he stepped back.

"I am not the fool," he said in a hard, cool voice. All his exasperation, and all the days and nights of the long, cold journey rose in him like bitter bile. "You see me through a veil of your own devising, Lady. You think I want your piddling place here in the north? I could have been a prince in the south, with all the wealth and power I liked. You saw so clearly that I could not take Simir's place, and you fear so much that I want your own. I am not the fool, Lady; no. I am not the one so jealous of her own importance that she is afraid to teach wisdom to her own daughter. I gave myself to you, Kata. But if you wish, I can leave, and you'll never need to fear me again. I can find a soft life in the south, and no jealous witch to make my life miserable. Now we can call a truce, or I can go this moment. And you call tell them I ran from you. But you're the one to choose now,

not I. And you're the one to say which is stronger magic — pulling a dead body from the water, or giving it back the spark of life." He clenched his hands at his sides, and he would not allow himself to look away from her face.

She hesitated, staring at him, as if reading the soul behind his eyes. At last, more quietly, she said, "Why didn't you use your witch's power to go down into the crevasse after him?"

"I told you then: I promised. I tried to honor that promise, whatever you may think. At the end, there was no choice."

"He was no special friend of yours."

"He was a comrade on this journey. And a human being."

She was the one to drop her gaze, finally, and then to half-turn away from him. "You have nowhere to go in the south," she said.

"No."

"You stayed among us, in spite of . . . unfortunate events."

"Yes."

"You really think this is the home you never had."

"I've thought so, sometimes. I would regret leaving it. But I have left many places before, and I have many regrets; I have the strength to carry another. But not to joust with you, Lady. I'll have no more of that."

"You never feared me."

"I did."

"But not anymore."

"You have great wisdom, and I respect you. Respect is better, I think, than fear. I would still serve you, Lady, if you would let me. I want to serve the good of the people of the north, just as you do. How much better it would be if we worked together."

She met his eyes. "Simir would be sorry to see you gone."

"And your daughter, I think."

"She's of no importance." She held her hand out to him. "Shall it be a truce, then?"

"With all my heart," said Alaric, and he took her hand. It was cold, cold as ice, but the grip was firm.

"You belong in the north," said Kata. "You don't believe in the net of power that lies across the world, but you are part of it just the same. Perhaps you'll understand that by the time this journey is done." She let his hand go at last. "I thought you were a coward, Alaric. But now I know

that you were only a child. The north will nourish you, and you will become full-grown with us."

He bowed to her.

KATA WOULD not let them stay encamped any longer, for their goal was still far off. Grem was weak, so they made a litter of part of the large tent, and each of the others took one end of a pole for carrying him. Kata and Alaric walked in front. They crossed the crack at the narrow place she had found.

She consulted her north-seeking needle often now, and Alaric noticed that it sometimes quivered side to side, as if unsure of the north. Kata said that was a good sign.

A few sleeps later, Grem was walking for part of each trek, tramping beside Alaric, saying with a grin that he wanted to be near help in case anything happened to him again. Soon enough, there was no more need for the litter at all, and Grem resumed his share of their common goods.

By then, Kata's needle was quivering constantly, like a palsied finger. By then, too, Alaric was beginning to feel ill.

He said nothing to the others. His main symptom seemed trivial — a slight dizziness that came and went, which was strongest when he was tired. He thought it must be a mild ague, aftermath of his dunking. Sometimes he felt almost queasy enough to vomit, but he fought it down. They had already suffered a delay, and he knew that Kata was anxious to keep moving.

But one day he drank too much water at one draft, and he did vomit, miserably and painfully; and once the vomiting began, he could not control it but spewed again and again; and when his stomach was empty, it continued to knot itself up, as if trying to turn his whole body inside out. Grem and Kata supported him while the spasms racked him, and when he was finished at last, and exhausted, they eased him to the ice, and Kata swept his mask off to look into his face.

"Pale," she said. "I should have seen it before this." She bared her right hand, warmed it inside her clothing, and slid it into his hood to touch the back of his neck. "No fever," she said. "How do you feel now?"

He swallowed thickly. "Thirsty."

She shook her head. "No water for now. It might bring back the vomiting. Does your belly hurt?"

"An ache here, from the vomiting." He touched his side.

"Was that there before?"

"No."

"And your head?"

"I'm . . . dizzy. Have been, a little, for a while."

"No pain?"

"No."

She stared at his eyes a moment, then prodded his middle with both hands. "Does this hurt?"

"No. I'm all right. It's nothing. Maybe the grease in the meat. It's a bit rancid. But I'm all right now. I can go on."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

She and Grem helped him up.

"Still dizzy?" she asked.

"A little. But I can walk."

"Very well." She gave him one last look, then said, "Grem, take his arm."

"I'm all right," said Alaric.

"Take his arm. Now let's go on."

In spite of his protests, Alaric found Grem's arm useful. For though, at Kata's instructions, he was soon able to eat a bite of meat and sip some water, the dizziness did not pass.

When they camped that night, Kata called him into her tent.

"It's nothing," he said. "It will pass. Probably when I wake tomorrow, I'll be fine."

She felt of his forehead, of the sides of his throat and the area beneath his jaw. She looked into his mouth and prodded his belly again. Then she shook her head. "This is no ordinary illness." She unpinned the brooch and held the quivering needle in front of his face. "This is yourself, my Alaric. Small wonder your head is dizzy."

He frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

"Did I not say that you were part of the net of power that lies across the world? This needle traces its lines and bows to their sources. But those sources dance, my Alaric; they dance so fast that, were they visible, no human eye would see more than a blur. From far away, the dance seems small, and the needle doesn't notice it; but we are close to them, and the needle quivers because it cannot keep up. Just so are you quivering, my Alaric."

"But I am not a needle," he said.

"No? Then the dizziness will pass. But I think it will not, until the dance halts. And it *will* halt, for that place and time is the goal of this journey. And that will be a good test of my surmise about you."

He smiled wanly. "Will it be soon?"

"Yes, soon. But until then, I have something that will help you." She reached into her pack and drew out a leather flask. "Give me your water bottle." When she had it open in her hands, she poured some powder from the flask into the bottle, capped it, and shook it hard. "Drink this when you're thirsty, a mouthful or two at a time. It will control the vomiting."

"And the dizziness?"

"Perhaps. But I think you would do well to hold fast to Grem, and not think about your head too much. Now you'll need rest. Go tell the others that it is time to use the wheel lamp."

"Wheel lamp?"

"Another bit of ancient magic. You will see."

The other men grinned when he told them, as if they were children being given a special treat. Two of them hovered at the entry of their tent while Velet went inside to fetch his pack, which was the bulkiest of them all and the only one that had never been opened in their journey. When he had untied its lashings, Alaric saw that almost the entire pack was taken up by a pyramid-shaped wooden box that measured nearly hip-high from base to apex. Two of its faces swung downward to reveal a strange device inside, held immobile by wooden chocks; with careful hands, the nomad men brought it out into the cold sunlight.

Alaric had never seen anything like it. In its middle was a six-spoked metal wheel an arm's length across, pierced by a vertical axle of the same length. Encompassing the wheel, but touching only the ends of the axle, was a seamless framework of pale green polished ceramic; a hoop encircled the wheel itself two finger-spans beyond its rim, and four struts led from that hoop to each end of the axle from points spaced equally about the circumference. The whole contrivance resembled some giant, elaborate spindle, and indeed, wound about the axle on each side of the wheel were many turns of thin, tough cord.

Lanri held the thing with the axle vertical while Velet swung a brace out from beside each of the lower four struts; the braces clicked into place, making four slanted legs for the thing to sit on firmly. There was a flat loop

at the end of each brace, and Lanri hammered his longest tent pegs into them, making the device as stable and immovable as any structure could be on the ice. Then he strapped cleats on his boots, and Velet did the same; and Grem pulled Alaric back twenty or thirty paces away from them.

"We have to give them plenty of room," said Grem.

Lanri took the free end of the cord that was wound about the axle above the wheel, and Velet took the end from the one below the wheel. They looked at each other, nodded, made a synchronized count, and began to ease apart, the cords tight in their hands. Faster and faster they moved, their cleats biting hard into the crusty surface; between them the wheel of the device spun up, faster and faster, like a child's top. They were still running headlong, when both cords came free of the axle, and they staggered as the cords snapped into the air like frightened snakes.

The wheel, spinning, began to glow. By the time Grem pulled Alaric back beside it, it was yellow-bright and yellow-hot, like the flame of a wood fire.

Swiftly, the men opened their tent up and, pulling it to the device, enclosed that glow in leather walls. Inside, the wheel lamp was like a brazier, flooding the space with light and warmth.

"I haven't been this warm since we left the band," Grem said, holding his hands out to the glowing wheel as to a flame. He had spread their ground covers between the wheel lamp's braces, to keep the ice beneath from melting too much.

"But what is this thing?" asked Alaric.

"Only Kata knows," said Grem.

But all she would say was, "Ancient magic, my Alaric. And good only here in the heart of the north."

The wheel spun for a long time, longer than he would have credited; he fell asleep before it even slowed perceptibly. By the time he woke, it had halted and dimmed, but even so, he could still feel faint warmth radiating from it. During the next march the men showed him how, here in the heart of the north, all metal warmed, though nothing like the wheel lamp; even his knife was warm as flesh to touch, and if his hands became numb, he could bring the feeling back by wrapping them about the blade.

Kata's needle was quivering more violently now every time he looked at it, and though his own internal quivering was less, looking at the needle always made him feel worse.

Still they moved on, heads down against the ever-strengthening wind, daggers slipped into their mittens, the wheel lamp warming their sleep. Walk, sleep, walk, sleep, and still the ice stretched onward. Sometimes Alaric felt that Kata must have missed her goal and they would never find it, only wander with the uncertain needle until they fell off the end of the world.

"The world is round," Grem said, when Alaric voiced his suspicions in a half-joking tone. "It doesn't have an edge."

"I've heard that before," Alaric said, smiling with cold, cracked lips, "but it doesn't make a very good song."

And then, on a day like all the others, in a place that looked like any other place on the ice, Kata shrugged off her pack.

"We stop here," she said, and she began to pitch her tent.

The rest were happy enough to thaw themselves at the wheel lamp, even though they had not walked half as far as usual. Alaric was curious to see how long the wheel took to spin down; his wakefulness had never yet outlasted it. This time, however, before he could detect any slowing, Kata called him to come to her tent.

There she had a duplicate of the wheel lamp, though much smaller, and in a frame of polished wood where the seams and joints were easily visible. But it glowed as bright as the other, and filled her smaller space with warmth.

"Are you still dizzy?" she asked, gesturing for him to sit down beside her.

"Yes, though your medicine helps."

"Good. You should be feeling better soon."

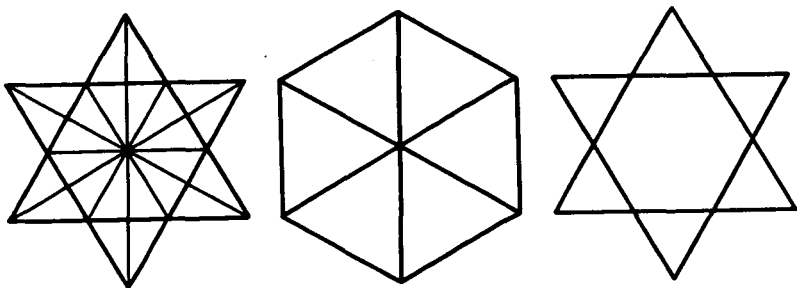
He smiled a little. "I hope so."

You could always leave us, you know. I think the dizziness would vanish if you went back south."

"I can manage."

She nodded. "Then I have something to show you." From within the only cushion in her tent, she drew the wooden box he had seen once before, the box inlaid with symbols of the Pole Star. She opened it and lifted the flask and cups out, lifted out even the mossy lining, and showed him its bare floor. The wood was pale there, not ebony like the rest, and burnt into it was a queer family of symbols — first, the familiar Pole Star; next a hexagon with its vertices joined by internal crossing lines; and last,

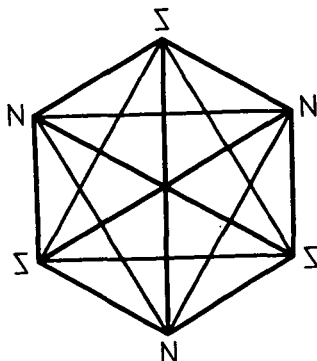
a six-pointed star made from two overlapping triangles:



"These are symbols of power," she said. "The first you know — the Pole Star, ruler of the north. Ruler of yourself, my Alaric, from the day you were born. The second, the bound hexagon, derives from the heart of the Pole Star and represents the powers of attraction; as iron is drawn to the lodestone, so these powers pull upon each other, though they never unite. The third symbol, the triangle star, marks the Pole Star without its heart, and represents the powers of repulsion; as one lodestone can repel another, so these powers strive to thrust each other away, yet they never fly apart. These are the forces around us this very moment, my Alaric."

He smiled again. "Small wonder I'm dizzy."

"Indeed," she said. "And now I will show you the deepest mystery of all." She touched something in the box, and the pale wood that bore the three symbols fell free, revealing another bottom beneath, and another symbol.



"This is a figure of my own devising, yet based on all that I learned

from my own teacher, and since. It combines anew the attractive and repulsive forces of the last two figures — to show the northern heart of the net of power that overlays the world. But it is not merely a symbol, my Alaric; it is a diagram. It is a map of the land on which we sit at this moment." With the tip of one finger, she touched the lowermost vertex of the figure. "We are very near to this one."

He peered at the indicated area. And not knowing what else to say, he said, "Well."

"This is one of the net's very sources, one of the six in the north. These runes at each vertex are the ancient signs of their qualities. Look here." She held the false bottom of the box close to the wheel lamp and touched the empty center of the third diagram. At that angle, Alaric could make out a pair of tiny runes carved in the pale wood, which he had not noticed before.



"This is the sign of the lodestone," she said, "for it bears both qualities of power in itself, though in none but the smallest measure."

"The two qualities . . . of attraction and repulsion?"

"Oh, nothing so simple, my Alaric. Nothing less than the powers that hold the world together."

"Yes, I can see that would not be simple."

"And here, in the very midst of it all, equidistant from the sources of power and held in thrall by them, is the axis upon which the sphere of the world spins. The axis, capped by the Pole Star, upon which the very sky spins. No, these are not simple things, my Alaric. I would not spend my life on simple things."

He looked at her. "Will we be going to that axis?"

She shook her head. "We have reached our goal, or so close that it is near the same thing. We have only to wait now until the sources of power stop dancing."

"Will it be a long wait?"

"Midsummer Day, or thereabouts, and that is very soon."

"And then?"

"We harvest our crop and go home."

"Crop? What crop grows on barren ice?"

"A fine one, usually," she said. "Of course, we can't know if this is a good year until we see it."

He shook his head, but only for a moment, for it made the dizziness worse. "Well, I have seen wonders with you already; why not a crop on the ice?" Then he peered once more at the various six-pointed symbols. Her explanations of them seemed like so much mystical gibberish to him, pompous and meaningless. "Tell me, Lady," he said, "why have you shown me these mysteries?"

"Because they are your mysteries, as much as they are mine, and you should understand them."

"I don't understand *that*."

She looked down at the symbols, and then, slowly, she put them away as they had been. "I was jealous of you; I confess it. Because I have worked all my life to gain some little power from these sources and their net, while you . . . you were born with yours; you never expended a sliver of effort to gain it. And I was angry, too, that you had your power but used it for trivial things. The Pole Star does not grant many its gifts, and it expects them to be well used, and you. . . ." She shook her head. "You were more concerned with saving your own skin than with being a witch." She looked at him. "A witch has responsibilities. Or so we think in the north." She paused. "They are my care, Alaric — all the bands of the nomad people. That is what it really means to be a witch."

"It is a great responsibility," he said softly.

Her eyes met his. "Once . . . I thought you were not equal to it. But now I think you might make a proper acolyte. We have a truce, Alaric. Shall we turn it into something more?"

He felt himself recoil inside, and he looked away from her. "Lady, you honor me. But surely your daughter would be —"

"Not her. A flighty child, not worthy. The witch must choose the student carefully. I was not my teacher's daughter."

He watched the glowing wheel as he might watch the flames of a fire. "You said you knew me, Lady, but I think not, or you would not make this offer. These mysteries are not for me."

"I thought I knew you, long ago. But you have changed."

He shook his head again. "I thank you with all my heart, but you

mistake me. Give your knowledge where it will find an eager student; I want no more than to be a minstrel."

"But you are more already."

"Please." He climbed to his feet. "I am your servant always, but my place is with the others."

She gazed up at him, her face expressionless. "I cannot force you to learn, Alaric," she said.

He sighed as he left her tent. He sighed and wished, not for the first time, for his lute, which was far, far away.

After so many days of travel, the nomad men were content to be still. But Alaric found that, without walking to distract him, the dizziness bothered him; so he would walk anyway, back and forth, till his legs were too tired to support him and he could sleep soundly.

They had been two sleeps in the same spot when he woke to find the dizziness gone.

Quietly, for the other men still slept, he went outside. The wind was brisk as ever and sang against his cheeks, making his breath into puffs of smoke. He closed his eyes for a moment. Yes, the dizziness was gone, and in its place was a feeling of such well-being as he could not recall. When he opened his eyes, Kata was standing beside him. He smiled at her immediately.

"You seem well again," she said. She looked haggard herself. Her eyes were bloodshot, with dark pouches showing beneath.

"I am very well."

She nodded and held out her brooch. The needle was rock-steady. "The dance has stopped," she said. "We must move on now, and quickly."

They had never struck camp so swiftly, but still it was not swift enough for Kata, who shouldered her own pack and started off before the men were ready to follow. They were hard put to catch up with her as she strode, eyes on the brooch, ever northward, and by the time they did, their goal was in sight.

"There," Kata said, pointing with one mittened hand.

In the distance, dark against the pale ice, Alaric saw a line, like a thin smudge of charcoal. Closer, the line gained depth and broke into a scatter of dark splotches. Closer still, the splotches resolved themselves into low, bushy plants so deeply blue-green as to be almost black, growing on the bare ice.

In all his wanderings, Alaric had never seen such plants before. They were compact, each no longer than a man could span with both arms, its tight cluster of rigid stems rising no more than knee-high, its thick, saw-toothed leaves forming a continuous cover over the top and hanging half-way down to the ice on all sides, like the dagged edge of a tunic.

Kata put her pack down in the midst of the plants. She showed her north-seeking needle to Alaric; it swung freely now, indicating no special direction, though it dipped downward as far as its supporting post would allow. "We'll watch the plants now," she said. "Tell me if any of them changes."

Just moments later, Lanri was the first to call out.

Alaric turned in time to see that, five or six paces away, the leaves that covered one of the plants were humping up in the middle, bulging. As he watched, they parted, and a pale green globe rose slowly from among them, borne aloft by a thick stem. When it was well clear of the leaves, the globe opened suddenly into a many-petaled blue-green blossom.

It was not a beautiful blossom. It most resembled a feather duster that had fallen into a pool of dirty oil. The petals were thick and waxy, and for a few moments they twitched, first one, then another, as if adjusting their positions. And then, all of a sudden, they spewed upward, as if blown by a gust from within the stem itself, flying apart as a spray of dark fragments; flying upward . . . and vanishing into thin air.

Alaric gasped. As the petals vanished, the white land about him seemed to vanish as well. In its place was the world, a sphere floating in blackness. And surrounding the world was a pulsing net of power, a net that rose from the icy north as from a clutching fist, and then spread out to envelope the globe before gathering itself back together to dive into the ice at the southern end of the world. He saw the net from afar, glowing sun-bright against the darkness, and yet he was also a mote on the net, sliding effortlessly from strand to strand, like a skater on a smoothly frozen pond. The globe spun beneath him, its surface streaming past his feet like rushing water, and on that surface he saw all the places he had ever been and all the places he had never been, countless places racing by, and he knew that he could go to any of them in an instant, this instant. For the net embraced them all, and the net was his.

As abruptly as it had come, the vision was gone, and he blinked his eyes and looked about him. The nomad men were moving among the

plants, cutting the thick leaves free and stuffing them into bags, leaving the plants mere clusters of naked twigs. But Kata was sitting beside him, gripping his arm very hard.

"Can you hear me now, Alaric?" she said.

He nodded. "I had . . . a dream, I think. A waking dream."

"Of what?"

"Of the net of power."

"Yes?"

He described the vision. If he closed his eyes, he could recapture pieces of it, though not all. Not the movement, nor the feeling of strength, nor the vastness of it all; no, that had already slipped away. But the glowing net, he knew, he would remember always.

"The sources of power have called to you," she said when he had finished. "You should not deny them."

"But I don't know what their call means."

"Of course you do." She gripped both his arms now, and looked steadily into his eyes. "My Alaric, we have come here because only when the points of power cease their dance do these plants blossom, and only when they blossom do they produce the substance we need for the Elixir of Life. Do they do this for our benefit? Of course not. They do it because the blossoms need that substance for their own journey. Do you think those petal-seeds disappeared to nowhere? No — they leaped upon the net of power and flew instantly to the other side of the world, to the very ice you saw in the south of your vision. The seasons are reversed on the other side of the world. It is winter there now, but come spring those seeds will germinate and grow and flower, and send their own seeds *here* in the very same way.

"You are like those seeds, Alaric; you leap upon the net and fly from one place to another without touching the globe in between. The net *is* yours . . . and you must learn to use the rest of its power." She was shaking him just a trifle now. "Learn from me, Alaric, and let me leave the north a great legacy in you."

He shook his head. "Lady, this is too much for me. I must think."

She dropped her hands away from him. "Yes. Think. Think hard, Alaric. This is something greater than any song."

He looked past her, to the men who were steadily gathering leaves. "Can I help you?" he asked.

She stood up. "We can do this ourselves. You should rest for now. We have a long journey back, and you haven't been well."

He stood, too. "I could make the journey much shorter."

She studied his face. "Yes, you could."

"I don't think it would harm your leaves. Not if they and I are so . . . intimately connected."

"No, I no longer think your power would harm them."

"Of course, the decision is yours. You must command me."

Her lips curved in the tiniest of smiles. "I don't look forward to all that ice myself. But you don't know where Simir's band has gone since we left them; and there is Oltavin, and our deer. Do you propose to carry the deer in your arms?"

"I can take us to the edge of the ice. That would be a help."

She looked at him for a long time then, and it came to him that her eyes no longer seemed cold. Wary, perhaps, but not cold. "Very well," she said at last, "I command it."

He took them one by one, with bags of leaves in their arms, and he took their packs separately, afterward. They were all happy to use magic to make the homeward trek shorter. Grem even asked why they hadn't used it before, to which Alaric said only that Kata had not wished it, and he was her obedient servant.

Oltavin was where they had left him, minding the deer and living in a hut he had built for himself of stones and ice. He seemed less surprised to see them return by magic than to see them return so soon, but he, too, was happy to turn south.

True to Kata's word, they reached Simir's band before the first snows flew. Well before. And Alaric just smiled when the nomads he had carried in his arms ascribed their speed to their very own pale-eyed witch.

That, he thought, was as it should be. Holding his lute close with one arm and Zavia with the other, he felt the journey slide away from him like a shed skin. *Yes, everything is just as it should be, in the strange and magical north.*

(to be concluded next month)



SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

THE FIRE OF LIFE

WHEN MY parents arrived in the United States, with my three-year-old self in tow, we moved into a very primitive apartment for that was all we could afford.

It had no electricity and only gas jets for illumination. It had a wood-burning stove, and an ice-box, rather than a refrigerator.

The stove was my special delight. My mother would light it with old newspapers and then put in sticks, and in cold weather, she would leave the door open for a while to help warm the kitchen. I would watch eagerly, for the fire seemed alive, consuming the paper and then seizing hold of the wood and creeping along it, turning blue and yellow and liberating a delightful odor along with its warmth.

Years later I realized that the place was a horrible slum apartment, but of course I didn't know that at the time, and when, after

two years, we moved out, I wept bitterly.

Nor did the new apartment comfort me. It had no gas jets, but electric lights instead, which burned with a dead, unchanging glare one couldn't look at (it took a while for us to learn about frosted bulbs). And the new gas stove was a terrible disappointment. I never saw living flame in a stove again, and I didn't see how a gas stove could possibly cook. It didn't even have stovelids that one could remove with a special holder and look inside at the fire. Of course, in mature life, I have occasionally watched someone's fireplace, but the magic was never quite the same — one must be a child.

Since I have never been part of a conflagration (and I never want to be, you understand) I have no experience of the horror and deadly danger of fire. I remember only the delight and beauty of it when I think of those old, old days. Nowadays,

when I know somewhat more than I knew when I was a little boy, I think of the intimate relationship of fire and life, and particularly of fire and human life — so that's what I'd like to talk about now.

The natural state for any planet is that of being dead. By that I mean that all the changes that can take place on it have just about taken place, and nothing much will or can happen further. The Earth, in the first few hundred million years of its existence, was nearly dead. It had developed an ocean and an atmosphere. The ocean was mostly water. The atmosphere was essentially a mixture of carbon dioxide and nitrogen.

The Earth, however, was not *completely* dead. Any time there is a difference in temperature between one part of a body and another part, that body is not dead, for heat will flow from the point of high temperature to the point of low temperature, and that will produce change.

Earth has two types of temperature difference. First, the planetary interior is much hotter than the planetary surface. This produces the cracking and shifting of the crust, together with earthquakes, volcanoes, mountain ranges, ocean deeps, and so on.

Second, the Sun is much hotter than the Earth, so that heat flows

from the Sun to the Earth's surface during the day, and from the Earth's surface to outer space during the night.

If a planet is completely dead, it might be viewed as having rolled downhill and to be resting motionless in the deepest part of the valley. The flow of heat, whether from the Sun or from the planetary interior, tends to drive the planet uphill slightly. The balance between the flow of heat and the natural tendency to move downhill balances, and the planet stays slightly uphill at all times.

From the chemical standpoint, the flow of heat forces the simple molecules of the ocean and atmosphere to combine into more complex molecules which have a larger energy content. The formation of these more complex molecules represents an uphill movement. With time, more and more complex molecules are formed until eventually some are so complex that they have the properties we associate with life.

The chief property of life is its ability to maintain itself in an uphill position by pushing parts of the environment downhill and making use of the energy liberated.

We then have the situation of the radiation of the Sun pushing certain molecules uphill and of life maintaining itself uphill by ruth-

lessly pushing some of those uphill molecules downhill again. This sort of thing is sufficient to maintain a population of bacterial cells in Earth's oceans, and, for over two and a half billion years, that's all there was on Earth.

Life managed to improve on the situation, however. Certain bacterial cells developed "photosynthesis," evolving substances that made it possible to use the energy of visible light to form complex molecules in much more massive quantities.

Photosynthesis made it possible to drive Earth much farther uphill, and this, in turn, made available much more energy when the compounds were allowed to drop downhill again. This gave the cells a much larger food supply so that they had the wherewithal to grow more complex and to associate with each other to form multicellular organisms.

What's more, in driving chemicals uphill, molecules were produced that retained the carbon and hydrogen atoms (and some other atoms, too), but retained only a few of the oxygen atoms. The oxygen not retained was discharged into the atmosphere so that slowly the carbon dioxide content declined and the oxygen content rose.

It was the removal of oxygen atoms that increased the energy

content of the molecules. In moving downhill, the molecules that were rich in carbon and hydrogen and poor in oxygen combined with atmospheric oxygen, giving up part of its energy content which could be made use of by the various life forms.

The free oxygen content of Earth's atmosphere is maintained by the photosynthetic action of life. If photosynthesis (found in the green plants of the world) were to disappear, the complex molecules that now exist on it would slide downhill, combining with the oxygen and producing carbon dioxide. The oxygen would disappear and would not be replaced, and the Earth's atmosphere would become a mixture of carbon dioxide and nitrogen, as it was in the early period before life had come into existence. And life could not exist at the stage past the bacterial.

It is possible, under certain conditions — say, a temporary rise in temperature to a high point — for the downhill slide to reach catastrophic speed. In that case, there is a release of a great deal of energy in a short time, energy that makes itself felt as heat and seen as light. In short, there is fire.

This can only happen if there is a certain amount of free oxygen in the atmosphere, so that much of it is available for runaway combina-

tion with carbon/hydrogen compounds. What's more, it can only happen if water is present in only limited quantities, for water, present in excess, prevents temperature from rising high enough. And since water does not itself combine with oxygen, it tends to dilute and damp out the combination of other materials with oxygen.

This means that even if ample supplies of free oxygen are present in the atmosphere, fire is impossible as long as life is confined to the waters of the world.

This is not to say that there wouldn't be heat and light in the world. A volcanic eruption may send a stream of glowing lava across Earth's land surface. Lightning may send flashes of heat and light through the atmosphere. There is, however, nothing for the lava or the lightning to set on fire.

It was not until about 450 million years ago that plant life began to invade the dry land, and only by 410 million years ago, were there the first forests.

Land plants are, to a large extent, dry, so that if a stream of lava flowed into a forest, or a lightning bolt hit a tree, the catastrophic downhill movement of the molecules would be initiated and there would be a fire. The fires would then continue till the denser parts of the forest burned out or until a rain fell.

(Recently, there was a report that analysis of trapped air bubbles in amber showed that, in the time of the dinosaurs, the atmosphere was 32 percent oxygen instead of 21 percent as it is today. I could not believe that. With an atmosphere that was one-third oxygen, forest fires, it seemed to me, would never go out, and land life would become sparse indeed.)

It is odd to think that fire has only been possible during the final tenth of Earth's existence so far, but land animals have only existed during that final tenth, so fire has been part of their total experience.

There is no telling when or where a fire would start. We can't tell when a volcano will blow its top, or which one will do so next. Even if a forest is well away from any volcano, it would still be subject to the blind blow of a lightning bolt. Once a fire did start, plant life, which is immobile, can do nothing but burn, and animal life, which is too slow to outrace the fire, can do nothing but burn, too. Those animals that can run fleetly, however, do so, and there can be no panic like that of trying to stay ahead of a deadly, devouring monster whose hot breath you feel behind you.

It is with respect to fire that humanity has marked itself out clearly from all other life forms.

There are other animals that are tailless, other animals that walk on two feet, other animals that communicate rather subtly, other animals that use tools and even make them, other animals that can, after a fashion, reason or create. In almost all respects human beings differ from other animals in degree rather than in kind.

With respect to fire, however, the difference is absolute. All human societies, without exception, make use of fire. No species of life that is not human makes use of fire or has ever made use of fire.

How did this come about?

We don't know, of course. We can only speculate.

There comes a time when a forest fire dies down. It has run out of easily available fuel, or it has been drenched in a rain, but a few twigs, shrubs, or patches of grass are still smoldering, or are burning in final, feeble gasps.

Human beings have run from the fire along with all other forms of life capable of doing so, but now only human beings, with their overpowering curiosity, will linger to watch. My own feeling is that it was children who watched the fire, when it seemed safe, with the same absorption that I watched the fires in the stove when I was a child.

It is inevitable that, as the fire died down, some child would feed

it another twig or a handful of brush. It is also inevitable that the mother would come and snatch the child away and stamp — stamp — stamp the fire. And maybe hand the child a juicy one on the ear, for his or her own good.

It is inevitable that, eventually, some adult would say to himself (or herself), "Hey, if we drag that thing inside and we're very, very careful, it will light the place and keep us warm."

In any case, a cave near Peking was discovered about 1927 in which bones were found that indicated occupancy by very early human being — say, 500,000 years ago. Along with these bones were signs of campfires.

Consequently, the use of fire dates back at least 500,000 years and it was not discovered by *Homo sapiens* but by our hominid predecessor, *Homo erectus*.

Fire was an enormous boon to hominids. By giving light and warmth, it made it possible for hominids to move out of the tropics. It was also useful as a way of inflicting a salutary fear on other animals, even the fiercest.

Only human beings learned not to be unreasonably afraid of fire. A fire in a cave, or within a circle of stones, would keep the predators away. They might snarl and slink about the outskirts, but that would be all. In fact, I imagine people

would carry burning branches to scare game and set them to stampeding into traps.

Then, too, fire made it possible to cook food. Meat was made softer and tastier if roasted. What's more, the roasting killed worms and bacteria so that the meat was safer to eat. Eventually, fire made plant food, otherwise inedible, most palatable. Try eating rice or corn on the cob before heating them and you'll see what I mean.

Fire also made possible various chemical changes in inanimate matter (soft clay into hard pottery, sand into glass, ores into metals, and so on). In short, fire introduced humanity's first age of comparative "high-tech."

To begin with, of course, fire could be obtained only after it had been started by natural means. Once one had a fire, it had to be kept burning continuously, for if it ever died out the search for another fire would have to be instituted at once.

The time came, however, when techniques were developed for starting a fire where none had been before. This could be done by friction, by turning a pointed stick in a depression in another stick, a depression that contained very dry shreds of wood, leaves, or fungus ("tinder"). The heat of friction might eventually ignite the tinder.

We don't know when such meth-

ods were first developed, but the technique of starting a controlled fire where none existed before would represent another enormous step forward.

The original fuel for fire was wood in one form or another, whether a huge log, or a bundle of twigs and grass, or anything in between. The material was all around and it was easy to burn.

From a chemical standpoint, wood, or plant tissue generally, is extraordinarily complex, but the chief component is cellulose, which consists of giant molecules that are, in turn, made up of a rather simple building block.

The building block is made up of six carbon atoms, ten hydrogen atoms and five oxygen atoms, and that combination can be used, more or less, to represent wood as a fuel.

Notice that wood is partly oxidized. Oxygen is already present in combination with carbon and hydrogen, but that is only a *partial* oxidation. If the carbon and hydrogen were completely oxidized, they would become carbon dioxide (with molecules consisting of one carbon atom and two oxygen atoms) and water (with molecules consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom). Every carbon atom would require two oxygen atoms and every two hydrogen atoms would re-

quire one oxygen atom.

This means that the six carbon atoms of the cellulose building block would require twelve oxygen atoms, and ten hydrogen atoms would require five oxygen atoms for a total of seventeen. Only five oxygen atoms exist in the molecule so twelve more must be obtained from somewhere, and that somewhere is the atmosphere, where it exists as oxygen molecules made up a pair of oxygen atoms each.

So we combine the building block formula with six oxygen molecules to get six carbon dioxide molecules and five water molecules.

In order for wood to burn completely, in accordance with the equation, oxygen has to reach all parts of the wood. This happens generally as far as the wood in a campfire or in a fireplace is concerned. The wood is piled together loosely, and the heat of the fire causes the air above it to rise, producing a draft that brings fresh air into the neighborhood of the wood.

However, on occasion, people might want a large fire — to roast a whole antelope at some festival, for instance — and, in that case, oxygen doesn't get to the bottom portions of the pile of wood in any great quantity.

The heat of the fire makes the complex molecules in wood break down, causing water to steam off

and also producing small molecules of carbon-containing vapors. These vapors are inflammable, mix with air, and combine with the oxygen content to give off light and heat over a sizable volume of the mixture. The actual flame of a fire is the mixing and combining of inflammable vapors and oxygen. As the wood breaks down, releasing steam and inflammable vapors, there is a residue left behind that is richer and richer in carbon atoms until finally what is left over is almost entirely carbon.

The carbon left behind can be made to burn, but the burning is difficult to get started. Once the burning does start, it does so without flame, since carbon does not vaporize until extremely high temperatures are reached. It therefore burns only at the surface, glowing quietly and persistently, and with a higher temperature than that of ordinary burning wood.

This carbon residue is called "charcoal," which may come from old words meaning "turning to ember." (An "ember" is a lump of matter that burns without actual flame.)

The conversion of wood into charcoal may have been the first chemical process developed by human beings for the production of a useful substance. We don't know when it first happened, but it must have taken place deep in prehistoric

times.

Charcoal may have had only limited uses, however, until 1500 B.C.

By that time, metallurgy had existed for a couple of thousand years. Ores had been heated to obtain silver, copper and bronze, for instance. Iron would have been a particularly valuable metal but it didn't seem to exist in the ores. (Iron was known, however, because it could be found in the form of meteorites.)

Someone, however, must have started a charcoal fire on rocks that happened to be iron ore and found drops of iron in the residue. By about 1500 B.C., the Hittites in eastern Asia Minor had developed a technique for smelting iron ore with charcoal. The higher temperature of burning charcoal was needed to force the oxygen atoms that were in combination with the iron atoms to combine with carbon atoms instead, leaving the iron atoms free. (Properly done, as was learned some centuries later, some of the carbon mixed with iron to produce steel, a particularly hard and tough alloy of carbon.)

Since iron soon turned out to be absolutely necessary for tools, weapons and armor, the demand for charcoal grew rapidly and charcoal production became a vital industry.

Now a vicious circle set in. As fire was used for more and more

purposes to increase the food supply and add to human security, the population naturally increased so that still more fire had to be used to continue to produce the good things and make further population increase inevitable.

It must have seemed to early man that the supply of wood was infinite, or virtually so, since new wood grew as fast as old wood was used. And yet, as population grew and the uses of fire multiplied, a deforestation began to take place. This was hastened as human beings turned to the production of charcoal in quantity. Charcoal production is very wasteful of wood since so much wood must be burned away in order that some is left behind as charcoal residue.

People had to go farther and farther afield to find wood and, eventually, there was pressure to find an alternate fuel.

The answer to the problem came about because the process of charcoal formation had taken place in nature on an extremely large scale (and extremely slowly — but what's time to a planet?)

Beginning about 345 million years ago, and continuing for over 100 million years, huge forests of primitive trees grew in large areas of low, flat, swampy land.

These trees eventually died and

fell into shallow water where they were slowly covered by mud and sediment not particularly rich in oxygen. That made total decay difficult. Some decay did take place, but the residue grew richer and richer in carbon. There developed therefore a kind of charcoal.

Ordinary charcoal, made by human beings, is rather light and crumbly. The charcoal made out of decaying trees that were covered by mud and sediment was compressed under the weight of overlying layers and became dense and hard. It still burns and smolders, but it does not resemble ordinary charcoal. It is called simply "coal," therefore.

Even today, coal is forming. There are swampy, boggy areas, where decaying plant material can be dug up and dried out to be used as fuel. This is "peat." Some of the hydrogen and oxygen has already been lost as vapors so whereas fresh wood is about 50 percent carbon, peat is 60 percent carbon. The next stage is "lignite," which, when it is dry, is nearly 70 percent carbon.

Beyond that is a kind of coal that is about 85 percent carbon. If this coal is heated in the absence of air, so that it doesn't burn, the 15 percent that is not carbon is driven off, along with some of the carbon. The material driven off is a black tar, or pitch, that, in ancient times, was called "bitumen." That

is why this kind of coal is called "bituminous coal."

Finally there is a kind of coal that is at least 95 percent carbon. This burns with a red-hot glow, forming an ember, as charcoal does. The Greek word for "ember" is "anthrax," so this kind of coal is called "anthracite coal."

Coal is forming much more slowly these days than in past ages, when those large primitive forests in the swamps existed. Peat and lignite therefore make up only a small percentage of all the coal in the world. Anthracite coal formed in only a few areas where there was a great deal of pressure. It, too, makes up only a small percentage of all the coal in the world.

Most coal is bituminous coal, and there is a great deal of that under the ground. There may be as much as 8,000 billion tons of it here and there in the Earth.

Though almost all of this coal is underground, some few coal seams may have been heaved upward and uncovered by geological processes so that occasionally lumps of coal might have been found lying on the ground. They can scarcely have attracted much attention. Yet, once in a while, a piece of coal might happen to burn. Perhaps a lump of coal was accidentally kicked into a campfire; or perhaps a lump just happened to be on the ground in

the place where a campfire was built. Then it might be noticed that, after the fire was out, this odd piece of black rock was still smoldering. Eventually, people must have started looking for such black rocks in order to use them as fuel.

The Chinese did so first, and when Marco Polo visited China in 1275, he took note of this and wrote of it in his travel book in 1295.

So Europeans started looking for lumps of coal, and some people, when they found them, must have wondered if they could find more if they dug underground. Such digging was done first in the Netherlands.

The English learned of this and took particular note because, by 1600, most of the native forest was gone, and what was left was earmarked for the English navy.

The English therefore started looking for coal with particular intensity and, by 1660, were producing 2 million tons of coal each year. This was more than 80 percent of all the coal that was being produced in the world.

At first coal was used only as fuel to cook food and to warm the houses in winter. It was bituminous coal and it burned with a smoky, sooty, smelly flame. London became a dirty city indeed.

Despite the coming of coal, wood still had to be burned to pro-

duce charcoal for iron-smelting. In 1603, however, an Englishman, Hugh Platt, discovered that if bituminous coal was heated in the absence of oxygen and the pitch driven off, what was left behind was something very much like charcoal. It was called "coke."

At first, the coke was of indifferent quality and did not work well as far as iron-smelting was concerned. It wasn't till 1709 that an Englishman, Abraham Darby, was able to use coke on a large scale for iron-smelting.

Then, as more and more coal was needed, some way had to be found to quickly pump water out of the coal mines. In order to pump out the water, steam engines were invented, and they could be used in quantity largely because the steam could be formed by burning coal under the water containers. And because steam engines could be used in quantity, they could be used to power machinery, steamships, steam locomotives and so on.

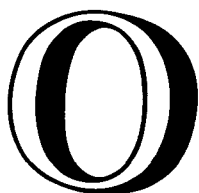
In short, it was coal that was the power behind the Industrial Revolution, and it was England's experience with coal mining that made it certain the Industrial Revolution would begin there and not somewhere else.

Yet coal was not destined to remain the king of fuels forever. I'll continue the story next month.

Kedrigern the wizard and his wife Princess have had some extraordinary adventures in these pages, most recently in "Spirits from the Vasty Deep" (December 1986), but nothing more remarkable than the affair of the mirrors of Moggrople. A new novel, KEDRIGERN IN WANDERLAND, is scheduled for August publication.

MIRROR, MIRROR, OFF THE WALL

By John Morressy



OUTSIDE THE BREAKFAST nook the birds were singing merrily. The morning was sunny, breakfast was delicious, Princess was looking her loveliest, and the spells were going well.

Kedrigern finished his third muffin and looked upon the world with a benign eye and a full belly. A single muffin remained on the dish. On an impulse, he swept up the crumbs from the tabletop, dropped them on the dish beside the muffin, and rose, saying "My dear, if you don't want this muffin. . ."

"I couldn't eat another bite, Keddie. You take it," said Princess.

"I'm quite full, too. I thought I'd bring it outside and feed the birds."

"A lovely idea," Princess said. "I'll come, too."

Birds were here and there about the dooryard, hopping, chirping, pecking, darting glances from side to side, going about their avian affairs. As the first crumbs hit the ground, the birds fluttered off cautiously, then returned and began to eat.

"Pretty things, birds," the wizard observed.

"Very. And such skillful fliers," said his wife.

"You're very good yourself, my dear."

Princess looked away modestly. "Thank you."

As Kedrigern dispensed the last handful of crumbs, a new bird alighted, with a faint but distinct *clink*, scattering the rest. It hopped toward the wizard, folded its wings, and bowed. This was uncommon behavior for a bird, and Kedrigern turned his full attention to the newcomer.

The bird was about the size of a blue jay, but it was no blue jay. Its body was gold, its wings gold and silver, its tail silver and electrum. Its eyes were emeralds; crown, wingtips, and tail were studded with emeralds and rubies; its bill was pearl; its feet, niello. The little creature glittered like a treasure chest by torchlight.

"Am I in the presence of Master Kedrigern, the famed wizard of Silent Thunder Mountain?" the bird inquired in a small, high, but very clear voice.

"You are, my good bird. Is there anything I can do for you?" Kedrigern replied.

The bird clicked rapidly several times, cocked its head, hopped closer, and said, "I have a message for Master Kedrigern from his old friend Aponthey. To wit: 'Have come into possession of magic crystal with unusual properties. Not my line. Would appreciate your opinion. Come if you can. All best wishes, Aponthey.'"

"Is that all?" the wizard asked.

The bird swiveled its head around completely, gave a flirt of its tail, and said, "That is all. At the sound of the chirp, I will be ready to accept your reply whenever you wish to give it. Please do not hurry. I am a mechanical device and can wait indefinitely."

"Polite little fellow," Princess observed.

"Aponthey was always meticulous," said Kedrigern.

"Who's Aponthey? You've never mentioned him."

"He's a bright young lad, very talented. He's an inventor, a clockmaker ... a mechanical genius. He worked on the famous Iron Man of Rottingen."

"I've heard of it, but I never saw it."

"Nothing but a heap of rust now, I'm afraid. But that's not Aponthey's fault. He did the interior works. The local boys did the body, and they botched the job. Aponthey was always at his best with smaller things, anyway — like this bird."

"It's exquisite," Princess said, stooping for a closer look just as the little automaton chirped its readiness. "And so richly adorned! Seventeen jewels, at least."

"Aponthey did a very similar one for the emperor of Byzantium, all hammered gold and gold enameling. A couple of Grecian goldsmiths got all the credit, but it was Aponthey's work. Marvelous thing, from what I've heard. It used to sit upon a golden bough, and sing of what is past, or passing, or to come. The lords and ladies of Byzantium loved it, but the emperor claimed that it kept him awake."

"Emperors are very hard to please."

"Aponthey took the bird back and replaced it with a dozen mechanical ladybugs. They used to fly in formation and do tricks, very quietly. The emperor was pleased."

"How nice for Aponthey. And what are you going to do about his request?" Princess asked.

"I really don't know. I have no pressing work at the moment. But it would involve . . ." He paused and made a sour face, then forced out the hated word, ". . . travel."

"Is it far to Aponthey's workshop?"

"It's far to everything, my dear. And it's always uncomfortable going, and ugly and dusty and hot along the way, and dangerous and nasty, and disappointing when you finally get there, and twice as bad coming back."

"You sound as though you don't want to go," said Princess.

"Actually, I do. It sounds as though it might be interesting. I haven't had anything to do with magical crystal objects since our contretemps with the crystals of Caracodissa. You remember that, I'm sure."

"I certainly do," said Princess grimly.

"Tricky thing, magic crystals, but they can be useful. Good sources of information."

"I'd rather trust to gossip and hearsay," Princess snapped.

"Now it sounds as though you don't want to go."

"Whatever gave you that idea? It's a perfect season to travel. We can make it a little holiday."

"Ugh."

"You can gather nice fresh herbs along the way. We'll pack up lovely snacks. It will be nice to see Aponthey again, won't it?"

"Yes," Kedrigern said reluctantly.

"And how far is it, really?"

"About three days' ride each way."

"That's no distance at all! Tell the bird we'll go."

With a resigned shrug, he said, "Very well, my dear. If that's what you want."

"It's what you want, too, and we both know it."

Turning to the bird, Kedrigern extended his arm and said, "All right, bird, I'm ready to reply." The tiny automaton unfurled its wings, ascended smoothly, and perched on the wizard's left wrist.

"Please speak directly into my beak, and do not get too close," it said.

Kedrigern raised his arm until the bird was at the level of his chin, about a forearm's length away. "Is this good?" he asked.

"Excellent. Please proceed," said the bird, and opened its beak wide.

Kedrigern looked into the gaping beak and suddenly felt very foolish, standing in his dooryard talking into a clockwork bird. But he pulled himself together, cleared his throat, and, in a voice only slightly strained, said, "Hello, Aponthey. Are you listening? This is Kedrigern. I hope you're well. It's lovely here this morning."

"The crystal," Princess whispered with an urgent gesture.

"Ah yes, the crystal. About this crystal of yours, Aponthey. We're coming to have a look at it. My wife and I, that is. We'll leave tomorrow, and we should arrive in three days. Won't stay long."

"Keddie, we can't just pop in and run. What if he has a serious problem?"

"All right, then. We won't stay long unless there's a serious problem. Good-bye, Aponthey. See you in a few days."

When Kedrigern finished, the bird closed its beak with a snap. Uttering a crisp "Thank you," it rose from the wizard's wrist and circled the couple once, then headed northwest.

"Well, what do we do now?" Kedrigern asked.

"We pack," said Princess, and, taking his hand, she led him into the house.

APONTHEY'S RESIDENCE was an easy, pleasant ride of less than three days. The roads were dry, and free of travelers. The weather was neither too warm nor too chilly. Each night, Princess and Kedrigern made their camp in a field of wildflowers and slept under the stars, lulled by breezes heavy with the sweet scents of summertime. In the mornings they augmented their simple breakfasts with fresh

berries. So idyllic was the journey that Kedrigern could find no cause for complaint; he had to content himself with dire predictions of rain, cold, and brigandage upon their return. To lighten his mood, Princess broached the subject of their host.

"What kind of house does Aponthey have?" she asked.

"Nothing grand. It's really just one big workshop. You might find it a bit messy, but it's certain to be interesting. Clocks of every kind and shape and size, with figures that wave their arms and kick their feet and roll their eyes and cut capers . . . things that whiz and click and clank and tick and buzz . . . terrible uproar on the hour, when all the clocks do whatever they do all at once."

"We must ask for a quiet chamber."

"Aponthey probably doesn't have one. Better to put something in our ears at night."

"What's he like?"

"A sprightly chap. Full of energy. Hops about like a flea, always doing a dozen things at once and planning two dozen more."

"He sounds exhausting."

"Well, most of his energy goes into his work. Still, he can be a very lively companion. Oh my, yes," said the wizard, smiling nostalgically and shaking his head. "I think you'll like him, my dear. A charming lad, really."

"How much farther is it to his house? You said three days, and this is our third day on the road."

"We should arrive at any moment. We have to pass through these woods first. Aponthey's house is in the center of a large cleared area. He always liked to have a lot of open space around, so he could get a good — wait a minute, now."

"Is something wrong?" Princess asked.

Kedrigern pointed to a black column of stone that rose from the ground twice the height of a man. One side was smooth and polished, and on that surface, at about head height, was incised an elaborate A above a curious angular symbol.

"This shouldn't be here, in the middle of the woods. It's the boundary marker of the clearing," said the wizard.

"Are you sure?" Princess asked.

"I'm positive. I marked out that symbol for the stonecutter. It's a warning to ogres. I watched this column being set in place."

"Maybe someone moved it."

Kedrigern's only response was a thoughtful grunt. He tugged the medalion from inside his tunic and raised it to his eyes, sighting through the Aperture of True Vision. "There's the house," he announced. "And someone's moved that, too. It's surrounded by trees. I don't like this."

The road was narrow and erratic here. They made their way slowly through the trees and to the dooryard before Kedrigern reined in and said, "This is the place. He's made some alterations, but this is definitely Aponthey's house. How on earth did it get here, though, in the middle of all these trees? I'll go and knock at . . . ah, here's a servant. We can ask this old fellow."

An aged man emerged with slow steps from the doorway. He stood blinking for a moment, leaning on his stick, gazing vacantly ahead, and then he noticed the two figures on horseback. He stared, but did not speak.

"Good day to you, aged sir. Is Aponthey at home?" the wizard asked with a friendly salute.

"He did not," the old man snapped.

"Didn't what?"

"Who?"

"Aponthey."

"What do you want with Aponthey?"

"Aponthey wants something with me. I'm Kedrigern, the wizard, and this is my wife, Princess. Aponthey asked me to come."

"Kedrigern? You're Kedrigern? The wizard?" The old man asked in a high, piping voice. He began patting various parts of his person and eventually drew out a pair of thick spectacles and fumbled to put them on, dropping his stick in the process. When the spectacles were on, he shuffled closer to peer intently at his visitors, and at last wheezed happily. "Kedrigern! After all these years! You don't look a day older, you scoundrel!"

"Aponthey?" the wizard asked softly.

The old man let out a cracked peal of laughter. "Didn't recognize me, did you? You never did have a memory for faces, not you. Spells, that's all you remembered."

"Well, well . . . it's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Sixty years, almost," said the old man with relish. "I bet you don't remember the last —"

"I do, I do! It was at my tower. You and Fraigus and some of the others gave me a surprise party for my 110th birthday. It went on for days."

"They don't have parties like that anymore," said Aponthey. "Good thing, too." He squinted at Princess and said, "Who's she?"

"Aponthey, I'd like you to meet my wife," Kedrigern said. At his words, Princess tossed off her riding cloak, gave a little preliminary flutter of her gauzy wings, and then rose slowly from the saddle to come to ground at her husband's side.

"She flies," Aponthey said in a hushed voice. "She has little wings, and she flies! That's beautiful work. Who made her?"

"Nobody made her. She's real. She's my wife."

"Real?"

"So pleased to meet you, Aponthey. I've heard ever so much about you," said Princess sweetly, extending her hand.

"You're real. And you fly," he said softly, awed.

"They're magic wings, but they're permanent. Very strong, and very handy," Princess said with a smile and a quick flutter of her wings.

"Where'd you get them?"

"It's a long story."

"Well, tell me over dinner," said Aponthey. To Kedrigern, he said, "You'll have a lot to tell me, too. Good to see you, old scout. Glad you dropped by. Whatever brought you here?"

"You asked me to come. Something about a crystal."

"Crystal?"

"A crystal with unusual properties," Kedrigern prompted.

"Oh, that crystal! Remind me to show you the crystal before you leave. Interesting thing. I was going to send for a wizard I know, and ask him to. . . ." Aponthey stopped, thought for a moment, then said, "I did. That's why you're here."

"It is. You sent a bird with a message."

"Little gold-and-silver bird with a pearl beak?"

"That's the bird."

"His name is Skibreen. Faithful messenger, but absolutely no sense of direction. He'll probably show up in a month or two. Where's my stick? I had a stick," Aponthey said peevishly.

Kedrigern picked up the stick and placed it in his hand. Aponthey took it, studied it critically, said, "Well, come in," and started into the house.

"Bright young lad, Aponthey," Princess said under her voice, smiling innocently. "A sprightly chap, too."

"It's been only sixty years, my dear. Not even sixty, in fact. I keep forgetting what a long time that is for people who aren't wizards."

"It's a long time for trees, too. They grow into forests."

"I know, I know. We got here, didn't we?"

"I just want you to keep alert. Your friend's memory is failing, and you'll have to ask very precise questions if you expect to help him out with his crystal."

"Aponthey's memory hasn't failed. He was always absentminded. Kept a good kitchen, though, even in those days. We should have an excellent dinner," said Kedrigern, taking her arm.

They did. The food was superb, the preparation masterful, the service punctilious. Three lovely ladies, all of pale gold and ivory, with emerald eyes and coral lips and dresses of pale blue enameled silver covered with tiny white flowers, brought dish after dish from the kitchen, placed them on the sideboard, and curtsied daintily to the guests. Three bronze footmen with beryl eyes and colorful livery of black, red, and green enameling served the meal, moving on smooth feet with no more sound than a barely audible ticking from their inner works.

When the last dish was removed, Kedrigern breathed a soft sigh of repletion and said, "A feast, Aponthey. A meal to be proud of. My compliments to your cook."

"I'll bring him in, so you can compliment him yourself. Old Collindor loves praise, but I don't have many visitors these days," Aponthey said, taking up a little crystal bell that stood by his hand. He shook it, but it made no sound.

A creature looking something like a pair of copper caldrons joined by a large spring glided into the room on silent casters. Eight flexible arms extended from the upper caldron. Two of them held whisks, one a spoon, two others forks, and one a towel. Raising its two remaining arms, the creature said in a deep, rumbling voice, "You summoned me, Master?"

"Yes, I did. My guests want to compliment you," said Aponthey, gesturing to Princess and Kedrigern.

"The roast was done to perfection," said Kedrigern.

"And the vegetables were the best I've ever tasted," Princess added.

"The bread was delicious."

"The trifle was a masterpiece."

"You are too kind," rumbled Collindor with a flourish of his two unoccupied appendages and a subdued motion of all the rest. "The credit rightly belongs to my beloved master." Aponthey sipped his wine and beamed. Collindor went on, "But the sauce for the trifle is of my own devising."

"That will be all, Collindor. Back to your kitchen," Aponthey ordered.

"As my master commands," said the creature, rolling soundlessly from the room.

"Did you make that?" Princess asked.

"Had to. Clients used to come here all the time, and they expected a decent meal. Collindor can come up with a delicious dinner for twelve on an hour's notice. Keeps the kitchen spotless, too."

"What a wonderful invention!"

Aponthey frowned. "Collindor has his drawbacks, Princess. First year I had him, I gained sixty-one pounds. Had to redesign him to make him go easier on sauces, and once I started redesigning, I decided I'd make him completely functional instead of sacrificing utility for appearance. He's the best cook I ever had, and a great help around the house. Winds up all the others, and winds himself, too. Great load off my mind, I can tell you."

"The perfect servant," Princess said admiringly.

"Not perfect. He still likes to experiment with new recipes."

"All good cooks experiment."

"They don't put ants and gravel and mainsprings and glue over stewed figs," Aponthey said angrily.

"As a rule, no. One must be precise in instructing servants," Kedrigern said. "We have a young troll-of-all-work. Spot is strong, conscientious, and absolutely reliable, but it requires careful instruction. I recall once suggesting that it come up with something different for dinner, and it —"

"Keddie, please!" Princess interjected with a queasy expression. "Not after eating."

"Sorry, dear."

"Enough talk about servants. What's this crystal you mentioned? It sounds interesting," Aponthey said.

"It's your crystal. You asked me to come and take a look at it," Kedrigern replied.

Aponthey looked bewildered. "I did! Then it must be around here

He examined the bell through the Aperture of True Vision and cried, "Aha!"

someplace. Maybe up in the . . . no, not there. Out by the old . . . ? No." He frowned, mumbled to himself, then said, "Collindor will know. I'll ring for him." He picked up the little crystal bell once more. As he rang it, his face lit up and he cried, "Here it is, Kedrigern! It's this crystal bell! Here, take it. Try to ring it. Go ahead, try."

Kedrigern took the handle of the bell between thumb and two fingers and shook it gently. It made no sound whatsoever. He and Princess exchanged a glance. She shrugged. He shook the bell again, more vigorously. Still no sound. Gripping the handle as one would a poker, he gave it three powerful shakes. Not a tinkle was heard.

"I don't understand. There's a clapper, and it hits the side of the bell. Is it enchanted?" Kedrigern asked.

Aponthey shook his head and turned up his palms in a gesture emblematic of helpless perplexity. "I don't know about those things. That's why I asked you here, I guess. I did ask you, didn't I?"

"You definitely did. You mentioned 'unusual properties.' What did you mean?"

Bewilderment again settled on Aponthey's features. "Well, it doesn't ring," he said at last. "That's unusual, for a bell. Bells generally ring."

"Where's Collindor?" Princess asked. "He came when Aponthey shook the bell before, but he didn't come this time."

"Oh, that's because I was thinking of him then, and Kedrigern wasn't thinking of him just now. That's how the bell works. I guess that's another unusual property."

"I would say so." Kedrigern held up the crystal bell so that the candlelight shone through its facets. He took out his medallion and examined the bell through the Aperture of True Vision, and cried, "Aha!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aponthey asked with a guarded look.

"Something's caught in this bell," Kedrigern said, keeping his eyes fixed on the object in question.

"Is that all? I'll have Collindor wash it off." Aponthey gave a subdued, self-conscious laugh, and said, "I thought it was some kind of magic, and all along it was a piece of food. Well, the old eyes aren't —"

"It's not food. You've got a spirit trapped in here."

"I do? Mighty small spirit."

"Size means nothing to a spirit," Kedrigern said distantly, turning the little crystal bell over in his hands. He set it on the table before him and, without moving his eyes from it, said, "Would you mind keeping absolutely quiet and not moving? I'd like to speak to this spirit."

Princess and Aponthey both nodded. Kedrigern pulled a thread from his tunic, tied a loop around the handle of the bell, and suspended it from a spoon, which he supported on two empty goblets. The bell now hung free. He spoke a phrase in an unintelligible tongue, and the bell began to vibrate in utter silence, and then slowly stilled. A shimmer of tiny points of light crept downward, from crown to waist, and congealed in a glowing golden band around the lip.

In a soft, solemn voice, Kedrigern said, "Spirit in the bell, do you hear and understand me? Tinkle once for yes, twice for no."

A single brittle tinkle sounded in the room. Kedrigern glanced at Princess and winked before going on with the next question.

"Are you a prisoner in the bell?"

Tinkle.

"Have you been a prisoner for long, lonely ages?"

Two emphatic tinkles.

"You haven't? A recent entrapment. Less than a century?"

Tinkle.

"Less than twenty years?"

Tinkle.

"Less than five?"

An excited tinkle that set the spoon shaking.

"This is a very recent spell. Odd that I've heard no mention . . . unless. . . Spirit in the bell, was this spell cast by someone you can identify?"

Tinkle. Tinkle.

"I think I see it now. Was it a trap waiting to capture anyone who came within its grasp?"

Loud tinkle.

"And do you wish to be released?"

Very loud tinkle.

"All right. Listen carefully, now. If I'm going to get you out of there, I'll need some information, and this system of questioning is very slow."

Tinkle.

"I'm glad you agree. I'm going to learn what I can from Aponthey, and then try to devise a faster method of inquiry. I'll be back to you as soon as I have something. Are you comfortable?"

Tinkle. Tinkle.

"Sorry. I'll put you on the table. Will that be better?"

Tinkle.

Kedrigern untied the thread and stood the little crystal bell on the table, safely distant from the edge. The glow around the lip broke into motes of golden light that swirled and slowly drifted upward, toward the crown, fading as they rose. Princess looked intently at the moving particles of light, frowning.

"Ask that thing one more question," she said.

"If you wish, my dear," Kedrigern replied, taking up the bell and re-fastening the string. "What's the question?"

"Ask it if it was once in the crystal of Caracodissa."

"My dear, do you really think . . . ?"

"I'd know those motes anywhere. That miserable little spirit had me speaking sideways, and backward, and upside down, and every which way but right, and if it thinks I'm going to stand idly by while you set it free, it has a big surprise coming. Go ahead, ask it," said Princess, and her voice was as steel.

"Well, spirit, what about it? Were you ever in the crystal of Caracodissa?" Kedrigern asked.

There was a pause as the golden motes crept slowly downward to form a band of light at the lip of the bell, then a hesitant, muted tinkle.

"And did you cause this lady to speak in a variety of awkward and embarrassing ways?"

A single tinkle, softer than before.

"I see. That does change things, doesn't it?"

This time the tinkle was barely audible.

"I don't mean to be cruel, Keddie, but it laughed at me. It made me talk absurdly, and then it *laughed* when I set it free!" Princess said, her eyes flashing.

"But it did make you speak, my dear."

"For a very brief time. In ridiculous ways."

"And you didn't really mean to set it free. You smashed the crystal

to bits, and the spirit escaped," Kedrigern pointed out.

"And good riddance," said Princess icily.

"Perhaps it wasn't laughing at you. It might have given vent to a laugh of sheer joy at being released from its confinement." The bell gave a single emphatic tinkle at these words, and Kedrigern concluded, "You see, my dear? No mockery was intended."

"It *laughed*."

"Wouldn't you, under the circumstances?"

"As a princess, I would consider the feelings of others, and suppress any expression of merriment until I got out of earshot of people I had caused to talk backward," said Princess with hauteur.

Kedrigern took her hands in his. "My dear, not everyone has the advantages of good breeding and polite upbringing. A young, adventurous spirit, on its own in the world, trapped in a magic crystal, is unlikely to learn good manners."

"Then it needs to be taught."

"Perhaps it's learned from its ordeal. If I could speak to it more easily . . . Let's see what Aponthey can tell us. The spirit may be truly sorry for what it did."

"Sorry it was caught again, that's all. A pretty dumb class of spirit, I'd say."

"All the more reason to be charitable, my dear," Kedrigern said. Princess responded with an uncharitable little sniff, and he turned to Aponthey. "Can you tell us anything more about the bell? Are there any other unusual properties that you recall?" When Aponthey only gestured helplessly and looked bewildered, the wizard asked, "How did you come into possession of the bell in the first place? Perhaps that has some bearing—"

"Unusual properties! *That's* what I meant! A whole barnful of them, and that little bell was in one of the chests, so I took it to use calling Collindor."

"A barnful of unusual properties?" Kedrigern asked.

"Pemmeny's old furniture — chests and dressers and sideboards and bedsteads and tables and chairs and stools and mirrors and—"

The bell tinkled wildly at Aponthey's mention of mirrors, and continued to tinkle until Kedrigern admonished it to be silent so he could question his host further. "Are there five identical mirrors, by any chance?" he asked.

"There might be. I never checked. Old Pemmeny, the merchant trader, used to buy up furniture all over the kingdom. I let him keep his things in my barn, and he let me use anything I wanted. Never had much use for mirrors."

"I'd like to see these unusual properties."

"Just a pile of old furniture, Kedrigern. Nothing to interest a wizard."

"Perhaps not, but I'd still like to see them."

"Anything you like. We can take a look after dinner."

"We just finished dinner."

"Oh. Well, then, let's go look at this furniture. Mirrors, you say?"

Again, the crystal bell burst into enthusiastic tinkling, and this time Kedrigern spoke to it. "Tell me truly, spirit: Have you been seeking the mirrors of Moggrople?"

Tinkle.

"And was it in the course of your search that you became trapped in this bell?"

Tinkle.

"Was it your intention to free Moggrople from the mirrors?"

Tinkle.

"Do you know how?"

He was answered with two dull, dispirited tinkles.

"Perhaps I can do something for both of you." Turning to Princess, Kedrigern said, "Surely, my dear, you can have no more objection to my helping this spirit. It was on a mission of mercy when it was trapped in the bell."

"Oh, all right," said Princess, throwing up her hands in frustration.

"What's going on, Kedrigern? Who's Moggrople? Are you saying I have a bunch of magic mirrors in my barn? What's it all got to do with this bell?" Aponthey demanded in cranky bewilderment.

Kedrigern calmed him down. As they walked to the barn, he recounted the history of the unfortunate Moggrople, assisted in his narrative by sotto voce remarks of a sardonic nature from Princess.

It all began with a magical object called the crystal of Caracodissa, a cube of unknown origin that held a vast array of helpful spells and counterspells. In order to gain access to a particular spell (or counterspell), one summoned up the indwelling spirit of the crystal, which then caused the desired spell (or counterspell) to appear on each of the six faces, though

the summoner could see only the side that he or she was directly observing. But no two versions of a spell (or counterspell) were exactly alike, and only one was correct; reading the wrong one had unanticipated, and often undesirable, results.

For some centuries, people accepted the odds at one in six. But a clever and resourceful witch named Moggrople thought of a way to beat those odds. She set the cube on a glass surface and surrounded it with mirrors, five in number, observing the sixth face herself, from below. When the spell she summoned made its appearance, she recited all six versions as rapidly as she could, one after another.

Whether in her haste she recited some portions inaccurately, or whether the spirit in the crystal, the crystal itself, or the maker of the crystal was angered by her presumption, no one could say; but the next thing Moggrople knew, she was trapped in the mirrors. Five of her. And which was the real Moggrople, no one knew, anymore than they knew how to find out or how to release her.

"I first heard of Moggrople when I was studying with Fraigus o' the Murk. I've always wanted to see those mirrors," Kedrigern concluded.

"What became of the crystal?" Aponthey asked.

"I dashed it to tiny pieces," said Princess fiercely. "That's how the spirit got free. Didn't stay free for long, though, the silly thing."

"It must have a great weakness for crystal," Kedrigern said.

Aponthey's barn was very large and very cluttered, and totally disorganized. Once his workshop, it had fallen into desuetude as he became increasingly more nearsighted and turned from life-sized clockwork figures to ever tinier creations, such as the precision marching band of ninety-six mechanical ants he was now making. To defray expenses, he had let out the barn as storage space, and paid little attention to what was stored there, and how. Consequently, it took nearly an hour of climbing over and around large, dusty objects before he cried out, "Here it is! Here's the chest that held the bell."

"Then the mirrors must be nearby. Look for five mirrors," Kedrigern said, lifting his lantern high.

"Over here, Keddie!" Princess called minutes later. "Five mirrors, all in a row!"

The men joined her and set their lanterns down to illuminate the gloomy corner of the barn in which the mirrors stood neatly lined up side

by side. At first glance, they were identical: a bit higher and broader than a tall, husky man, they stood on elaborately carved and gilded stands. As Kedrigern inspected them more closely, he found a single distinguishing characteristic: each mirror had a Roman numeral, from I through V, engraved on a gilded madallion set into the stand. The mirrors were covered with heavy cloths, presumably to protect the glass, but conceivably to protect any onlookers. All faced in the same direction.

"Did you look in the mirrors, my dear?" Kedrigern asked.

"I just lifted the corner of the cloth, to make certain it was a mirror, then I let it fall back into place."

"Good. I'm not sure what we're liable to see, and we mustn't take chances."

"Tricky things, mirrors," Aponthey said uneasily.

"These mirrors are trickier than most. Did Pemmeny tell you why he set them up in a row?"

"No. But he told me not to move them. He was definite about it."

Kedrigern nodded. "Then we won't move them. I imagine some kind of reaction takes place when they're able to reflect one another."

"Better leave them alone altogether, if you ask me. Just let them be. You can't trust mirrors," Aponthey said.

"It could be dangerous, Keddie," Princess added.

"It might well be. But when I think of Moggrople, trapped in a mirror for all this time . . . and that poor, foolish spirit losing its own freedom in an attempt to free her. . . . If we can help them, we must."

"You're right, I suppose," Princess murmured without any discernible enthusiasm.

"You're crazy, both of you. You were always too softhearted, Kedrigern," Aponthey grumbled.

"This isn't softness; it's professional courtesy."

"It all comes down to the same thing. Leave me out of it. I don't want to get mixed up with a bunch of witches in mirrors. I'm no wizard. I'm an honest craftsman, retired and trying to spend my old age in peace and quiet. I just want to work on my mechanical ants."

"Why don't you wait for us in the house, then?" Kedrigern suggested.

"And miss everything? I'll sit over here, by this sideboard, where I can get away quick if things turn bad. Go ahead, do your magic. I won't interfere," Aponthey said, shuffling to a narrow chair near an open lane of egress.

"I'll sit with Aponthey. We don't want him to be frightened," Princess whispered, and slipped off to join their host.

Kedrigern licked his lips, which suddenly felt dry. He pushed up the sleeves of his tunic, looked at the mirrors one by one, and then gingerly lifted the dusty cover of mirror I and draped it over the back. He saw his own reflection and the reflection of the large cherry armoire behind him, and nothing more. He followed the same procedure with mirrors II through V, and in none of them did he see anything that might be the form of a witch.

"Nothing magic about them. Just ordinary mirrors. Still, I don't like them," Aponthey muttered.

Kedrigern drew out his medallion and looked into each mirror, in turn, through the Aperture of True Vision. He saw a vague shape stirring in each one, but it was so dim and fleeting that it might have been nothing more than the optical aftereffect of peering through the aperture, which he always found to be a strain. He returned the medallion to his tunic and stood with folded arms, looking thoughtfully at the mirrors.

Clearing his throat, he said loudly and clearly, "Moggrople, are you in there? I'll release you if I can, but I have to know you're in there. Reveal yourself, Moggrople!"

He had scarcely spoken the last words when a soft glow appeared in each mirror, steadily brighter, and a shape formed around it. Soon the figure of a white-haired woman in a deep blue gown stood in each of the mirrors. She was a handsome woman, with mournful dark eyes and long elegant fingers and features of great refinement. She appeared to be in the middle years of her third century.

"Which of you is the true Moggrople? Speak!" commanded the wizard.

On the instant, a babble of sound erupted from the mirrors, filling the barn with quintuple echoes of a single voice crying, "Me! I am! Don't listen to them, they're all phantasms, I'm the real one! They're not real, I'm real, I'm the only real one, me, I am, listen to me, don't pay any attention to them, they're all creatures of deception, I'm Moggrople, me, I am, I am! Me, not them, me! Set me free! I'm real, they're not, me, in this mirror, this one, no, not those others, this one! Me! Me!" in overlapping, interweaving, contrapuntal disharmony. Kedrigern heard an angry voice, a shrill voice, a wheedling voice, an angry harsh voice, a shrill wheedling voice — all similar but all slightly different. He shrank back under the barrage, then

dashed forward to fling the covers over the mirrors in quick succession, raising a considerable amount of dust in the process but bringing on silence.

"Well, we know she's in there," he said, brushing his hands together and flicking dust from his tunic. "All we have to do is find out which one is the real Moggrople and how to get her out." When Princess and Aponthey did not reply, and only looked at him as if he were raving, he added, "Any suggestions?"

"Hit them with a hammer," Aponthey growled.

"I could not permit that. Much too dangerous."

"And very cruel," Princess said, giving Aponthey a withering look.

"What's cruel about it? That'd get them out of their mirrors in a hurry, wouldn't it?"

"We can't be certain. We're dealing with magic, Aponthey, and magic is a chancy business. I want to go about this in a very methodical way, for all our sakes."

"Talk to them one by one," Princess suggested.

"An excellent idea." Kedrigern turned to face the mirrors, hesitated, then turned back to Princess. "As a woman, and one who has herself experienced an uncomfortable enchantment, can you suggest a line of questioning?"

"You're the master wizard, Keddie," she said with a deferential gesture.

Acknowledging her words with a faint smile and a nod, Kedrigern turned to mirror I once again. He threw back the cloth, and Moggrople, arms akimbo, glared at him.

"Well, get me out of here," she snapped.

"You'll have to tell me how," he replied.

She gave an exaggerated sigh of patience strained to the limit of endurance and rolled her eyes to the heavens, muttering, "Wizards!" Then, collecting herself, she said, "It's very simple. You face me so that I catch the first ray of morning sunlight. You arrange the others in a pentacle with one empty side. That's all there is to it."

"Should the others face inward, or outward?"

"Inward, of course. Don't you know *anything*?"

"Thank you. I'll get back to you," Kedrigern said, whisking the cover over the glass before the figure within could object.

"That sounds pretty easy," Aponthey observed.

"Yes — if I spoke to the real Moggrople. Otherwise, I might have the formula for releasing mirror images into the world."

"What's so bad about that? They wouldn't take up any room, would they? Let them all loose, Kedrigern, so we can get out of this barn."

"Aponthey, don't you realize how dangerous they'd be? They're thinner than gold leaf and sharper than a magic sword. If one of them so much as bumped into a person sideways, that person would be sheared in half. Set one of these mirror people loose in a crowd, and it would be like scything wheat!"

After a long and thoughtful silence, Aponthey said, "Well, all right, then, be careful. But get on with it."

Kedrigern threw back the cover of mirror II, and Moggrople at once said, "*There you are!* Here's what you have to do to get me out of here, dear chap: face me so that I catch the last ray of the setting sun, and face the other four to a white wall on which you've marked, in black, the runes of—"

"I'll be in touch," Kedrigern said, covering the glass and proceeding to mirror III. Here he was instructed to turn her to the midday sun while arranging the others in facing pairs. Mirror IV frankly admitted that she had no idea how to get out, and mirror V, to Aponthey's delight, ordered the wizard to face her to the full moon and then smash all five mirrors with a silver hammer. Kedrigern covered mirror V and turned to Princess. He looked thoroughly disgusted.

"Well, I spoke to them one by one. Any other ideas?"

"I'm thinking, Keddle," she said patiently.

"Now that we've raised her hopes, we really must come up with something to help poor Moggrople. Think of her, caught in a mirror all these years. Aside from the professional embarrassment, it must be terribly uncomfortable to be squeezed into two dimensions when you've become accustomed to living in three."

Princess looked up at him sharply. Her eyes were bright with inspiration. A smile spread across her face. She clapped her hands, and with a soft humming of her little wings, she rose from her chair and perched on the top of the cherry armoire. "I think I've got it," she announced.

"My dear, I place the matter in your hands," said Kedrigern with a bow and a flourish.

"All right. I'll take care of everything, but first you must arrange the

mirrors so they face that narrow crack in the wall. Then keep out of sight and let me talk to Moggropple one by one."

"As you wish. Come, Aponthey, give me a hand with these mirrors."

"Not me. Pemmeny told me not to move them," Aponthey said, raising his hands in a defensive gesture.

"Well, I'm telling you they have to be moved. As long as they don't face each other, there's no danger. Come on."

Aponthey shook his head. "Those things are heavy. Use your magic."

"Magic is precious, as you well know. One does not squander it moving furniture. Give me a hand."

Grumbling and muttering, Aponthey rose and joined the wizard. Little more was required than to turn each mirror around so that it faced the wall of the barn rather than the interior, but Aponthey's grunts and gasps and stifled cries suggested the moving of mountains.

When the work was done, and Aponthey was once more seated, rubbing his back and groaning, Princess flew to a point in front of mirror I. Admonishing the men to remain silent and keep out of sight, she threw back the cover of the mirror.

"Who are you? Where's the wizard? I told him what he had to do, so why the delay?" Moggropple demanded.

"We've had a terrible accident. The other end of the barn has collapsed, and we're trapped in here. The only way out is that narrow crack in the wall," said the Princess anxiously, pointing over her shoulder, "and we can't fit through it."

"Well, I can. Let me out, girl."

"Not just now, thank you," Princess said, drawing the cover. She proceeded to mirror II, where she repeated the same story and received an almost identical response. On she went to III, and then skipped ahead to V. Each time, the exchange with Moggropple was similar to the first. Returning to mirror IV, she uncovered the glass and told the fabrication of the barn's collapse.

"Oh, fine, fine. Just what I needed. I finally have a chance to escape from this mirror, and now I'm trapped in a barn," Moggropple said sourly. "Well, go ahead, free me, if you've figured out how."

"But you wouldn't be trapped in here. You could slip through that narrow crack in the wall," Princess said innocently.

"Don't be absurd, child. Once I'm out of this mirror, I'll go back to being

a fully rounded, three-dimensional woman. You don't think I'm going to go about thin as a shadow, do you? Be sensible. That's all very well when one is in a mirror, but in the real world it won't do."

"You're the real Moggrople!" Princess cried happily.

"Of course I am. What are you talking about, girl? Can't you tell a woman from her reflection?"

"They're very convincing reflections. But never mind that. Don't you have any idea how to get out?"

"Not the least clue. It was all very sudden, you see."

"Yes, I've heard."

Both women were thoughtfully silent for a time. At last, Moggrople sighed and said, "Now, if only you had the crystal with you, there'd be no problem."

"The crystal?"

"The crystal of Caracodissa. Surely you've heard of it."

"It doesn't exist anymore, Moggrople. It's been smashed to bits," Princess said, lowering her voice to break the news.

Moggrople gave a wail of dismay. "Then it's gone! The spirit has been set free, and we'll never find it again! All hope is lost!"

"Wait a minute, now. Is it the crystal of Caracodissa that you need to get out, or the spirit in the crystal?"

"The spirit that indwells can set me free, that and only that. The crystal is . . . it's a crystal, nothing more. It's the spirit that counts."

Princess's face brightened. "If it's the spirit you need, then there's no problem. We have it in the house."

"But you told me that the crystal was smashed," said Moggrople, bewildered.

"It was, and the spirit flew off. But it came looking for you, and got caught in another enchantment. Now it's trapped in a crystal bell."

"It risked its own freedom to help me. . . . What a dear little spirit it is! We became quite close in the years we worked together, but I never suspected such devotion . . . such loyalty." Moggrople daintily wiped away a tear, and said in a husky voice, "It's very touching."

Kedrigern was on his way to the house at the first mention of the spirit. When Moggrople had recovered her self-possession, Princess said, "The crystal is coming. But I must tell you: when we asked it, it told us it did not know how to get you out."

"Oh, it knows, all right. It doesn't know it knows, but it knows, and I know it knows," Moggrople assured her.

And so it did. When Kedrigern returned and presented the bell to Princess, the little crystal was ablaze with swimming motes of light. At the sight of Moggrople, it began to tinkle merrily, vibrating with eagerness in Princess's fingers. It tugged her forward, toward the mirror, and drew itself to Moggrople's outstretched hand.

"It wants to come to me," Moggrople said.

"But how? The glass. . . ."

"It must be remembering the counterspell. Trust it."

The bell pulled itself around, and Princess yielded her grip, very slowly, until she was holding it by the lip. All the darting lights in the crystal rushed to the handle, and when the handle touched the surface of the mirror, they streamed out in all directions, turning the mirror into an opaque luminosity, like a still lake under a full moon. The glow faded, and the glass seemed to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist dispersed by a morning breeze. Out of the mist stepped Moggrople, holding the bell.

"I told you it knew," she said coolly. She handed the bell to Kedrigern. "You may have this, if you like. It's just an ordinary crystal bell now."

"And the spirit? What became of the spirit? She's not. . . ."

Moggrople brushed back her snowy hair and turned to display a glittering crystal earring from her left ear. "We're going to work together for a while. We've both been through difficult times, and we can be very supportive of each other."

"You must be famished," Princess said, taking the witch's arm. "Come inside. I'll have Collindor fix something for you, and you can tell me your whole story."

As the two women left to make their way through the labyrinth of furniture, Kedrigern went to Aponthey, who had been a silent onlooker to Moggrople's release. Smiling down on his host, Kedrigern gave the bell a shake, and it tinkled obediently.

"All fixed. Now you can ring for Collindor whenever you like, and the bell will behave like a regular bell."

"What about all those women in the mirrors?"

"Oh, they're gone. They were never really there in the first place. They were reflections of Moggrople, and now that she's out of the mirror, there's nothing to reflect."

Aponthey looked at him, shocked. "I don't like that very much."

"Neither do I. It was a nasty spell, any way you look at it."

"But where did those women go?"

Kedrigern shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Where does your reflection go when you walk away from a mirror?"

"I don't fool with mirrors. Can't trust them."

"Then don't worry about it. Here, take your bell. Let's join the ladies. I'm really for another helping of Collindor's excellent trifle. Working magic gives me an appetite."

APONTHEY'S GUEST bedroom was surprisingly tidy, the bed unexpectedly comfortable, for accommodations in an elderly bachelor's residence. It had been a busy day, and Princess and Kedrigern were happy to settle down for the night in such comfort. They blew out the candle and said good night, and lay for a time in relaxed silence.

"You had quite a long chat with Moggropple," Kedrigern observed.

"She was telling me about life inside the mirror. It was fascinating."

"Really? I should have thought it would be dreadfully dull. Repetitious at best."

"Oh no, not at all. She met all sorts of interesting people and had wonderful adventures."

After a thoughtful pause, Kedrigern said, "If it was so pleasant, why was Moggropple so eager to get out?"

"She missed her old life, and her friends, and her house. You saw how quickly she was off once she found her broom. Aponthey offered her a very nice little room for the night, but she didn't want to waste another minute." Princess yawned and did not speak for a time, then she added, "It would have been different if she'd been young, she said. If she were a little girl, she'd have been tempted to stay there. She could have been a queen, you know."

Kedrigern responded with a sleepy mumble. Princess went on, "It really made quite an impression on her. She's thinking of writing a book about it."

"A book?" Kedrigern asked, coming awake.

"That's what she told me."

"About being stuck inside a looking glass?"

"Well, not exactly. She's going to change things around a bit. I think she means to write it as though it happened to a little girl."

Kedrigern gave an irritable groan and raised himself on his elbows. He glared into the darkness petulantly. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. A little girl wanders into a looking glass and has adventures . . . who would read such humbug?"

"Moggrople thinks it might be popular with children."

"She does, does she? What does Moggrople know about popularity? She's been inside a mirror for over a century."

"Well, she's certainly had time to reflect," Princess said with a little snuffle of smothered laughter.

"That's not very funny," said Kedrigern sourly.

Princess did not reply. She turned sharply on her side, her back to the wizard, and drew the light coverlet up around her shoulders.

"Undignified, that's what it is," Kedrigern went on after a strained silence. "For a witch to let herself be caught like that is bad enough, but to write a book about it is . . . it's unprofessional." Kedrigern no longer felt sleepy. He felt aggrieved, and was in a mood to go on at length about his grievances.

Princess yawned and mumbled, "Good night."

Kedrigern let his head drop back on the pillow. He lay staring up at the low ceiling, frowning, arms folded on his chest, waiting for Princess to speak. She did not. In a low, caustic voice, he said, "Moggrople through the looking glass. Moonshine, poppycock, and balderdash."

There was no response from Princess but regular slow breathing. Kedrigern wanted to carry on a heated discussion, not deliver a monologue, and now he was unable to do either. He frowned on for a time, until it occurred to him that a three-day ride lay ahead of them, and they could not very well ride in silence all that time.

He sighed, smiled, and with a soft "good night," composed himself for sleep.



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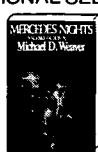
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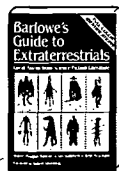
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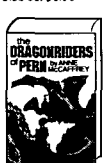
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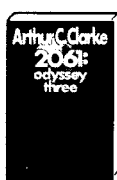
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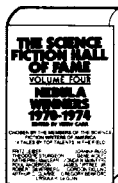
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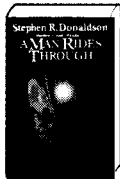
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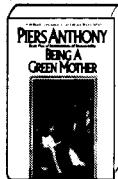
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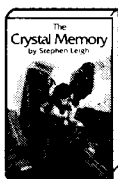
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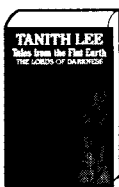
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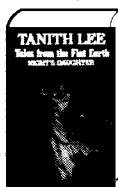
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